

Unitarian Theology II



Conference, Mill Hill Chapel,
Leeds October 2017

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Introduction

The second Unitarian Theology Conference in the UK of recent years was held at Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel in central Leeds on Friday, 13th and Saturday, 14th October 2017. This was a successor to the one-day Theology Conference in Manchester of May 2016, which posed the question: *What is Unitarian theology?* In 2017, the organisers (Stephen Lingwood, Jo James and myself) were looking for a wider reach.

And so it became a two-day event, with a theme for each day. ‘God’ came first, with three speakers taking different approaches: how one can relate to a Personal God; how our experiences of love shape our concepts of God; and thirdly, the quest for a ‘non-realist’ God. ‘Unitarianism’ was the focus on the second day: exploring theology from women’s experience (particularly relating to Unitarianism); the significance of encounters between early Unitarians and Islam; and finally asking whether Unitarians can be ‘evangelists’, and if so, how?

The speakers all tackled their subjects in depth and with passion, and we are extremely grateful to them: Rev Ant Howe, Dr Jane Blackall, Rev Lewis Connolly, Rev Dr Ann Peart, Dr Justin Meggit and Stephen Lingwood. Our gratitude too to panellists: Rev Dr Claire MacDonald, Lucy Harris and Robin Hanford, who at the end drew together well conference themes, while eliciting lively audience responses.

Tapping into the medieval mystics, the Rev Jo James, Minister at Mill Hill, led prayers and meditations through the two days – these were deeply-appreciated times of stillness. Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel proved splendid hosts, we were well supplied with tea, coffee and delicious eats throughout. Warm thanks to Mill Hill!

The conference took place in the month and year marking the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, and we acknowledged this in the strap-line: ‘500 Years On – the Reformation must continue!’ We did not ask speakers to relate their topics directly to the Reformation, but the legacies, particularly of the Radical Reformation, were present in the themes: how humans relate to the Divine, freedom and the continuing struggle for equality, tolerance and the use of reason.

Audience participation was not as high as at Manchester, but we felt the turnout – around 55 on Friday and just under 40 on Saturday – was still encouraging. And people watched live-streaming of the lectures at home on the Internet, thanks to the ever-enthusiastic James Barry.

We would like to thank the General Assembly Executive Committee, the Thornton Fund and the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry for their generous support for this conference – and UKUnitarianTV for the filming, particularly James Barry for his outstanding editing work in producing high-quality videos of the talks. And a warm thank you to the Rev Dr David Steers for once again taking on the editing of the conference papers this year.

What of the future? Well, the organisers have decided to pause for a while to reflect on what's been achieved so far, and to look at possible new directions. We won't hold a conference in 2018, but we have an aspiration to organise one in 2019.

Jim Corrigan

Chairman, Unitarian Theology Conference, Leeds 2017.

Note: The six conference lectures are all available to view as high-definition videos on the UKUnitarianTV website, by entering the 'Theology Conference' portal, and selecting 2017. The website address is: www.ukunitarian.tv

The conference was organised by the **Unitarian Theology Group**. This group seeks the theological and spiritual renewal of Unitarianism through organising academically rigorous and spiritually vital theological conversations.

Wrestling, Resisting, Resting – different ways of responding to the Divine voice

ANT HOWE

I live in the parsonage, just next door to the church I serve as minister. In the kitchen of the parsonage there is a multi-fuel stove. Everyone who visits during the winter months seems to gravitate towards the stove. The stove serves a dual purpose for me. It heats the ground floor of the house, but it also provides a focal point in the kitchen. Purpose and beauty....

I also look for the same things in my religion – purpose and beauty.

My multi-fuel stove (and indeed my religion) also gives me another gift: a challenge! Over the years I have developed a love/hate relationship with the said stove! Perhaps there is something within us which harks back many, many centuries which makes us love a real fire. It's lovely when there is a roaring fire going, but getting it lit and getting it to stay lit can be somewhat of a challenge – at least, I find it so. Over the years I've tried various combinations: paper, then sticks, and then wood and then coal, all in differing amounts. I've used firelighters, newspaper, and instant-lighting briquettes. The hope is, I will just strike a match and the combination of fuels I have arranged will ignite, but it doesn't always work that way. It's always somewhat hit and miss. The same combination which produced an amazing and energetic blaze one day seems to only produce a lot of smoke and no heat on another. On one particular day I can load the stove up and it will burn all day. On another day, I can put in exactly the same amount and I nip out for a couple of hours and come back to a stove full of ash and no fire. Fire-lighting (it seems to me) is not an exact science.

Interestingly, the one thing I have found which really gets the fire going when I add the end part of a candle to the fire. So, I look forward to the days when we need to change the Chalice candle at church. I take the remnant of the candle which has been used over a number of weeks during worship in church, and I add it to my stove..... and whoosh!

I thank God for the Flaming Chalice!

Just as lighting my stove is not an exact science, I also find that my

approach to theology is similar. Since becoming a Unitarian, my basic beliefs have not changed that much over the years, I find that different combinations and approaches work better for me at different times. For me, any journey into theology must offer something which is at the same time functional and beautiful, but also challenging. And we who unite around a simple cup and a flame in our worship have the opportunity to consider what will set something aflame within us.

Many of our churches and chapels were dedicated by our forebears to the worship of God and the service of humanity (beauty and functionality). It's up to us to consider what that means for us to today. Our religious movement is certainly faced with many Challenges as we strive to keep the Chalice Flame burning. Although, for me, the Christian tradition is what helps to fuel my relationship with the Divine, this talk is not about me declaring what aspects of our theological spectrum we should most emphasise. After all, the combination which ignites my spirit may well choke yours (and vice versa!).

Still, I can't help feeling that those who say 'Unitarians don't do theology' are denying themselves the opportunity of engaging with what has shaped our movement in the past and with where it may head in the future. On the first day I went to university to study theology we were given this definition of what theology is:

'A reasoned discourse about God'.

Of course, reason was one of those traditional pillars on which Unitarianism stood. 'Reason' isn't far from 'reasonable', and to be reasonable usually means meeting people halfway, seeing the other point of view, and staying polite – though it does not mean views cannot be passionately held.

Unitarianism has helped to teach me about reasonable theology – acknowledging that different views can be held in community. I am sure that it is not too much to hope that when Unitarians consider theology we will have an open-hearted, open-minded, and loving approach? But still, we can't get far into theology before we come to that word 'God' – which seems to comfort and disturb Unitarians in equal measure. Some of us embrace God, others are suspicious, some re-name God, some are sure, others are sceptical.... but still, we have all found within Unitarianism something precious.

We who have embraced a Unitarian identity have found that the Chalice Flame moves from a focal point to something which burns within us.

I wrote most of this talk whilst sitting at my kitchen table. There, to the left of me, was that multi-fuel stove which I talked about a few minutes ago. The weather has not been cold enough to light the stove yet – but it won't be long before I am again trying different combinations and trying to produce something of beauty which will also keep me warm through the cold and darker days. It will probably provide plenty of challenges this winter. I am glad within Unitarianism I can keep trying different things – knowing that some days it may work for me, and some days it won't. But that's ok....

The burning flame

There is something about the flame which attracts. From Moses' attention being drawn by a flame burning in a hedgerow, to tongues of fire resting upon the heads of the faithful at Pentecost, to the travellers on the way to Emmaus who, having discussed theology with the risen Christ exclaimed 'Were not our hearts burning within us whilst he talked on the road with us?...' And now to us who light a flame at the beginning of our worship and at other gatherings I guess that's my hope when Unitarians do theology – that something will burn within us as we share the journey together.

In my own faith journey I have concluded it is futile trying to put into words what God is (and even if I could my definition may not mirror your beliefs). For me, there has to be something about love in the mix when we talk of God. But even St Paul in his great discourse on love admitted that for now 'we see as in a mirror dimly.....'

Theology, as with fire-lighting, is not an exact science. But if we are open to sharing the journey we may find that something burns within our hearts. Perhaps not all the time, not every day – but there could be moments. We may not reach agreement if we were to try to define God, but we can talk of our response TO God that which we call God, or love, or life. After all, our response is what moves us from study to experience – from talking about it to living it and loving it enough to share it with others.

As I think of my own response to God, my thought turns to that story in the Bible where Jacob wrestles with some mysterious figure (Genesis 22). At first the figure appears to be human but then the text says that Jacob is actually wrestling with God. I've always been intrigued by this story for a couple of reasons: One reason is that Jacob's encounter leaves him bruised – reminding me that religion is not always comfortable. It's not meant to be. The other reason this story speaks to me is because of Jacob's persistence. He continues to

struggle with God and declares 'I will not let you go unless you bless me'.

I will not let you go unless you bless me. As I think of my own journey from being an evangelical Christian to eventually finding my true home within Unitarianism, there has been much wrestling between God and myself along the way. Unitarianism was a total contrast to what I had known before. It was and is a different way of being religious. You would've thought it would be a relief to let go of some of the doctrines I was struggling to believe, but I didn't find it so. I found the whole process bruising.

The one thing that Unitarianism couldn't offer me was the thing that I had built my religious experience on up to that point: certainty. Growing up I was certain I was saved – and equally certain that some were not. I was certain that the blood of Jesus cleansed from sin, yet only did so if you invited Jesus to be Lord of your life. This strange Unitarian religion (as it seemed to me at the time) both attracted me and startled me in equal measure. But there is something about a flame which draws us, and the Chalice Flame drew me in.

As I wrestled with my beliefs and with relationship to God I found myself echoing the words of Jacob:

'I will not let you go unless you bless me'.

I said those words to all the doctrines and beliefs I had previously held dear:

'I will not let you go unless you bless me..... I can't let you go, I won't let you go unless you leave me with something better.'

Within Unitarianism I have found that something. I still know that I am saved, but I've come to realise I was never truly lost. The process of wrestling with God changed me and bruised me but, ultimately, has blessed me.

The story is told of the man who lived on a beautiful island. When he died he took with him a handful of earth from his island home. However, when he tried to enter heaven he was told he could not enter unless he let go of that handful of earth. The man refused and, for many years, sat outside the gate of heaven alone. Eventually he let go of the handful of earth and immediately the gates of heaven were opened to him and the man found that heaven was just like his island home, only even more beautiful.

My own experience of wrestling with God has taught me that I had to let go of some of the doctrines I had previously believed, however fondly I used to hold them. The process of letting go opened up the path to something even more beautiful which I find as a Unitarian. I almost had to let God go in order to find God again. I sometimes tell my congregation in sermons: perhaps I believe less things now, but the things I do believe I believe in more strongly and deeply.

At the end of Jacob's encounter with God, Jacob asks for God's name. This is a question God won't answer and, as a Unitarian, I have had to realise we must still leave room for mystery. Even a theology conference like this mustn't get all the answers. Jacob would later say 'I have seen God and lived'. And we like Moses looking at the burning hedge can look into our Chalice Flame and realise that we are on holy ground, and that we have seen God and lived. Some of us see God as an external force, some see God in nature, some in humanity, some don't use the word – but we've all wrestled with it and we're here today.

As I was preparing this talk I turned to that great fountain of theological knowledge which is Twitter, where I found the words:

'Wrestling with God is a sign of intimacy. You can't wrestle with someone you're far away from.' Of course, the fact that it has been stated on Twitter doesn't make it true – but I am heartened when I hear of Unitarians sincerely engaging in theological debate. I like to think Unitarians quickly move from 'you can believe whatever you like' to 'you must believe what your honest reflection, experience and – yes – even your wrestling with God has told you is true.'

Jacob's experience is mentioned again in the Book of Hosea chapter 12 where it says:

'As an adult he struggled with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed....But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.'

Hold fast to love and justice

My thought now turns to the story of Jonah who was called to be a prophet. Now if you were to have a look on YouTube you will find all sorts of people calling themselves Prophets. I have noticed that they nearly all share a common feature: they are all proclaiming that God is going to bless people with riches and material gain. It's no wonder that they have a following! Who wouldn't want to be told that God is about to bless you with your heart's desire and money in the bank?

Unfortunately for Jonah, the message he was charged with wasn't quite so palatable. He was told that he should point out the sin of those living in Nineveh and that God would bring destruction unless the people repented. Whatever way you dress that up, that's not really a message anyone wants to hear. Jonah, realising that this message isn't going to win him any popularity contests sets off in the opposite direction! I can see why he did it.

Now those of us who were brought up on Bible stories will know the story and we rational Unitarians might dismiss the part of the story when Jonah gets swallowed by a large fish and yet lives for three days as perhaps being a bit too fantastic to be literally true. Jonah resists what he knows to be the calling on his life, yet the story would seem to suggest that resisting this calling would not allow him to progress. The message had to be delivered, even if it's a message not everyone wants to hear.

On the surface Unitarianism seems to be a very sweet message, and who wouldn't object to it? After all, you are free to hold your own beliefs, we don't demand too much of church members, and we don't ask our members to give 10% of their income! There is little fire and brimstone in our worship services. If we don't engage deeply with our heritage and theology there is, perhaps, a danger of Unitarianism becoming too comfortable. I love the episode of *The Simpsons* where there is an ice-cream festival at the church. Lisa looks at all the ice-creams on Rev Lovejoy's table and says 'Wow look at all these flavours. Blessed Virgin Berry, Commandmint, Bible Gum....' Rev Lovejoy hands her a bowl and says 'or, if you prefer, we also have Unitarian ice cream!' Lisa peers into the bowl and says 'There's nothing there' to which Rev Lovejoy replies 'Exactly!'

It made me laugh but I don't think it's true. I do not think that Unitarians don't have anything to offer. I also know that what we have to say isn't just sweet-flavoured.

I would say that being a Unitarian is to actually be entrusted with an uncomfortable message. We are charged with being religious yet speaking against the harm done in religion's name. Our faith demands that we speak a message of justice and inclusion, not just in the safety of our own churches and chapels, but it's a message which must be articulated loudly where needed. It is a prophetic message which will campaign for and witness to a better way.

We may gather for a lovely dinner and drink a toast to 'Civil and Religious Liberty the world over', but are we prepared to then strive for

that when it makes us unpopular? Are we willing to be the prophetic voice when we have disquieting things to say? Jacob wrestled with God; Jonah resists God but eventually realises that resisting his calling will not allow him to progress. I've always loved what happens next in the story. Jonah goes to Ninevah and tells the people there to repent and what happens? They do! Jonah is absolutely furious. Maybe he didn't want them to repent and was looking forward to judgement. He becomes enraged with God because God forgives the people of Nineveh. In the end, God has a conversation with Jonah to try to make him see that all people must be given an opportunity to respond to the divine voice.

When our message gets through, as it did on the campaign for marriage equality, we then have to think about the next prophetic message we have to share. As I have seen more mainstream churches gradually embracing some of the liberal ideas Unitarians have been proclaiming for years, I have to admit that there is a part of me that reacts a bit like Jonah. After all, if they start doing and saying all the things we've been doing and saying, where does that leave us? A part of me wants to say 'but they're Unitarian values, not yours!' And then I hear the Divine voice whisper 'no, they are divine values to be widely shared.' It won't be long before the next uncomfortable prophetic message comes to us to share. I hope we won't put up too much resistance to sharing it. The story of Jonah reminds me that once charged with a prophetic message, there is little option but to proclaim it.

The Wisdom and Power of God

Jacob wrestles with the divine voice.... Jonah resists it at first....and now my thought turns to Jesus of Nazareth who rested in a boat whilst a storm was raging. A few years ago I took a sabbatical from full time ministry. I took four months and had some sustained time to think, reflect, and to pray. One of the key questions I engaged with on my sabbatical was 'who or what is Christ'? I don't mean who is Jesus? My Unitarian faith had already helped me answer who Jesus might be, yet I was left with this word 'Christ' that I could not let go of from my evangelical Pentecostal days, but I wasn't sure what it meant for me as a Unitarian. I knew that I wanted to consider that question and also renew my passion for the Bible. The starting point for my contemplation was the Bible verse which says that 'Christ is the Wisdom and Power of God'.

Elsewhere, the Bible suggests that Christ is the timeless Eternal Word through which all things came to be and in which all things hold together; an anointing, the spark of life which is in all and which gives us all divine possibilities. Many of the world faiths assert that we are

made in God's image and that we share in the divine nature. If this, correct, I began to reason, then Christ is at the heart of us all. Maybe it is continually speaking to us, and even renewing us. My mind drifted to Bible verses I used to recite as a child: 'if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come' – and I began to relate to this idea of the Christ in a new way. I began to ask myself, what does this mean for me as a Unitarian? How can I express Christ in a given situation? How can I best express the Divine qualities of love, truth and justice? Many Christians assert that Jesus of Nazareth expressed the Christ fully. They will talk about 'the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.' In one of his hymns, our own Rev Cliff Reed writes 'Jesus died but Christ has risen.'

Now Jesus did seem to make some assertions about his divine nature such as 'I am the way...I am the light of the world'. Yet Jesus also told his followers 'YOU are the light of the world' and that his ministry was not a one-time and one-person event. In fact, Jesus stated that his ministry was just the start and that people of faith 'will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these'. How is this possible? It is the realisation that the Christ did not come to us once in the form of Jesus, but can be made manifest by every human being if we choose to respond?

It seems to me that Jesus was very careful to say that his power was not something unique to him, but that it came from God: 'The Father in me, he does the works'. When we see the life, works, and teachings of Jesus, are we seeing the Christ, and are we seeing Christ in what we do today?

The great Unitarian theologian James Martineau reminds us that the incarnation (God coming to humanity) was not true of Jesus (or Christ) exclusively, but of humans universally, and of God everlastingly. It would seem that Martineau believed that the Divine voice never stops speaking to us. 'Conscience is the voice of God'.

Now, I chose to spend my sabbatical on a canal boat which I owned at the time. I felt very New Testament because Jesus also took time away on a boat! Fortunately, I slept soundly and didn't have any storms to still like Jesus did – but I realised how important those words of his were 'Peace! Be still!' As my sabbatical drew to a close, I found myself meditating on another Bible verse:

'Religion that God accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.'

In other words, religion must have a practical and beneficial element. It must make a difference if it is to be of any use – which brings me back to where I began: religion, for me, needs to be beautiful, functional and challenging.

I am not sure, as a minister, I have perfected keeping myself unpolluted ‘from the world’: stress still creeps in, the need to get more stuff, worries about things I can do nothing about. Before I know it, the ‘still, small voice’ is drowned out and I lose my sense of calm and peace. How do you stay calm in the midst of a storm and whisper, with confidence, ‘Peace! Be still!’? This is something I am still devoting a proportion of my thought and prayer time to.

As I end this lecture, I remain convinced that our Unitarian faith is a precious gem which can bless so many more people. It is for everyone: ‘For God wanted them to know that the riches and glory of Christ are for you all. And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This is the hope of glory.’

We might not all use those same words but our amazing faith, this ‘hope of glory’, demands all the love and devotion we can give it. It needs to be shared!

Jesus of Nazareth told the following parable:

‘The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.’

I believe wholeheartedly that I have found that ‘pearl of great price’ and that Unitarianism teaches us that Divine is not some far away possibility, but is something to be experienced, yearned for and shared right here, right now. I believe that the Divine voice is speaking. We might wrestle with it, resist it, learn to rest upon it – and we may do all of these things at different times.

As St Augustine wrote: ‘Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.’

I thank God again for the Chalice Flame, and that through this process of wrestling, resisting, and resting it now burns deep within me. I am proud to be a Unitarian.

Models of God and the Meaning of Love: How might our experiences of love shape our concepts of God?

JANE BLACKALL

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
John 4:7-8 (NRSV)*

1. Introduction

‘God is love’ is a powerful saying and one which has shaped the Western religious imagination. It is also, perhaps, an idea which has had a wider influence, beyond its Christian origins, and which to some extent still persists in what we might call our post-Christian culture. However, as well-known and significant as it is, the phrase ‘God is love’ is ambiguous. The terms ‘God’ and ‘love’ are open to interpretation and understood in all sorts of different ways. The well-worn questions: ‘What are we talking about when we talk about God?’, ‘What are we talking about when we talk about love?’, and ‘How are God and love connected?’ have all played a part in shaping the piece of work presented here (an abridged version of my undergraduate dissertation, completed at Heythrop College in 2017, under the supervision of Professor Fiona Ellis).

However, the initial motivation for this study was my own frustration at having spent six years studying theology and philosophy of religion without ever having addressed the question – ‘What are we talking about when we talk about God?’ – in a satisfactory way. Indeed, it was only rarely acknowledged as a serious question that needed answering. It seemed to me that only a narrow range of God-concepts were typically being discussed in popular culture, in mainstream church discourse, and even in academic philosophy of religion, at least as taught at degree level, and this was something I found troubling.

My own personal context, as a member of a Unitarian congregation, a liberal religious community within an increasingly

secular society, gives me a particular perspective. I am aware on one hand of the diversity of God-concepts held by religiously literate Unitarians (and other liberal religious) and on the other hand I am aware of widespread rejection, bafflement, and scorn towards any notion of God whatsoever, amongst a significant section of the wider population (including a fair number of my friends outside the church). For this reason, I wanted to look more deeply at models of God, to bridge the theological gaps between secular culture, academic discourse, and my own religious context.

The way I went about this was a little unusual. I used methods inspired by the developing field of ‘ordinary theology’ to explore concepts of God, experiences of love, and connection between God and love *as understood by reflective people outside of academia*. I carried out some original research, surveying what people – believers and unbelievers alike – really thought about such matters, and how their outlook related to their life experiences. My intention was to discover what could be gleaned from critical reflection on the intuitive theology of my peers, whether they were inside or outside of the church.

The phrase ‘ordinary theology’ was coined by Jeff Astley, who initially defined it as ‘the theology and theologising of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind’ (note that he does take care to limit his definition to what he calls ‘reflective’ God-talk).¹ Astley is, however, of the opinion that ‘ordinary theology’ might be extended to include the reflection of those who are agnostic and atheistic, and says, ‘if theology is understood in an unrestricted way as our reflection on what we take to be ultimate, then everyone has some sort of theology as everyone has some sort of faith, believing in something or someone... theology is “any reflection on the ultimate questions of life that point towards God”’.² He asserts that even academics normally set out by doing theology in an ‘ordinary’ way, building on their own intuitions, their ‘disposition and orientation of the soul’, and shaping their own personal ‘irregular dogmatics’ through reflection on everyday life experiences.³ Astley regards research into the ‘ordinary theology’ of reflective people as an approach that may bring about more believable and workable forms of conceptual, systematic theology.⁴

In this paper I will reflect on the saying ‘God is Love’ and explore the question ‘How might our experiences of love shape our concepts of God (and vice versa)?’ For context, I will outline some widely-held models of God, and conceptions of love. I will describe my method for gathering a range of ‘ordinary theology’ perspectives, and will share excerpts from a few ‘case studies’, in which people speak of their own

theology and life experience. Finally, I will highlight a handful of theological issues that arise from this research.

2. Context

God: The word ‘God’ is ambiguous. In different contexts, amongst different groups of people, different models of God tend to be assumed by default. There are variations between religious traditions and within religious traditions and it could even be said that every individual believer’s theological outlook is unique.⁵ This lack of coherence should hardly be surprising, as it may be said that God is beyond all human concepts, and the most any model can do is to point, very inadequately, towards God.⁶ Theology may be thought of as ‘the attempt to provide mental forms through which aspects of divine truth may be communicated to the human mind.’⁷ I will mention a few key models of God – ‘mental forms’ – which are common in academia, the church, and the wider world.

In our present, secular, post-Christian culture, many non-religious people’s understanding of God has been influenced by depictions of God as a man with a beard in the sky.⁸ A more sophisticated version of this naïve image might regard God as ‘human in character, but immortal and invisible... a mind, like ours though better... out there somewhere... perhaps just beyond the edge of the universe... a separate being.’⁹ There are still many people who think God is quite straightforwardly a supernatural person of this sort.¹⁰

A very different model of God, one shaped by the work of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, is typically presented by academic philosophers of religion.¹¹ The God of classical theism is the *omni-God*: omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.¹² It is a very abstract model, and as the theologian and Anglican priest Keith Ward notes, the God of classical theism can be hard to square with the traditional view of the Christian God as ‘busy listening to prayers, deciding which ones to answer... and engaging in long discussions and arguments with the patriarchs and prophets.’¹³ These two models of God, sometimes referred to as the ‘God of the Philosophers’ and the ‘God of Sacred Scripture’, stand alongside each other in tension *within* the monotheistic traditions.¹⁴

An alternative model of God, one which seems to be gaining traction in recent years, is offered by process theology.¹⁵ Process theology has been described as a ‘*philosophical*’ theology, not grounded in claims of special insight or revealed truth, but in philosophical

reflection.’¹⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, the originator of process philosophy, had no interest in a supernatural God who was an exception to metaphysical rules.¹⁷ Process theology involves a pantheistic view in which everything, past and present, is *in* God.¹⁸ Prominent process theologian John Cobb reflects, ‘Every occasion in the world incorporates into its own life some aspect of the divine... Meanwhile God incorporates all that happens in the world into God’s own life... Everything creatures do or say or think or feel makes a difference to God... That means that what human beings do to other human beings – and to sparrows – they do also to God.’¹⁹

Love: Philosophical and theological reflections on love tend to focus on three main forms: *agape*, *eros*, and *philia*.²⁰ *Agape* is altruistic, selfless, giving love; it has traditionally been associated with Christianity.²¹ *Eros* is love which involves desire; it might be said to affirm that which is valuable and good.²² *Philia* refers to friendship; a bond of mutuality, reciprocity, goodwill, and cooperation.²³ Contemporary thinkers have added a number of further distinctions to this list.²⁴ However, in reality, the boundaries between the forms of love are not clear.²⁵ In the biblical quotation from John, ‘God is Love’, the Greek word *agape* is used, and Anders Nygren claims that *agape*, understood as altruistic, universal love for all, is the only truly Christian form of love.²⁶ However, according to Thomas Oord, the wider scriptural context suggests ‘love’ should be interpreted more broadly than our modern understanding of *agape* might seem to imply.²⁷ Throughout the scriptures ‘God both inspires creatures to love with *philia* and *eros*, and expresses these forms of love for creation. Provided *philia* and *eros* are defined adequately, one should regard God as expressing these forms of love.’²⁸ There is a strand of thought throughout history which claims that love, properly understood, may be seen the universal principle, motivator, and animating force of all human activity.²⁹

3. Research Method

I set out to sample some ‘ordinary theology’, to gather the perspectives of a varied range of individuals on the topic of ‘God’ and ‘Love’, and hoped to end up with a selection of interesting ‘vignettes’ to illustrate key questions of theological and philosophical interest. Seventy potential participants were recruited via social media. These volunteers were then sent a questionnaire consisting of eleven open-ended questions about: their understanding of the word ‘God’ and the word ‘Love’; their theological outlook and religious affiliation (if any); sources of depth, meaning, and value in their lives; ways in which

they have experienced depth, meaning and value through loving relationships in particular; ways in which they felt they had encountered 'God' through loving relationships; and finally their own understanding of the saying 'God is Love'.

Forty-four questionnaires were returned. Participants were in the age range 22-78 years. Twenty-eight participants were female, thirteen male, two genderqueer and one agender. The largest group of respondents were Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist (UU), six were Christian, one Quaker, one Wiccan, three had dual affiliation (Unitarian plus Quaker/Sufi/Interfaith) and thirteen had no affiliation. This particular profile of respondents reflects my own religious context and social networks.

4. Case Studies

I will present short excerpts from just three of the responses, to indicate a few key theological themes, which might be of particular interest to Unitarians. These all-too-brief 'vignettes' are intended to present the 'ordinary theology' of participants in their own words.

4.1 Vignette #1: 'Julia' - Atheist Humanist, Female, Aged 32

I'm an atheist, so if I use [the word 'God'] I'm substituting an idea of what I think other people might use it for. It's hazy but generally a male, white, bearded interventionist who sits on a cloud being alternately cross and happy with humans. [If somebody else spoke about 'God'] I'd assume they meant a similar thing to me – the Abrahamic God. I don't believe there is anything supernatural in the universe. [I find depth, meaning and value] everywhere. In people, in nature, in science, in music, in food, in gardening and singing and dancing. In my students, in my colleagues, in pebbles. In everything I can see and in things I can't see. Life gives value to life. I don't need anything else.

I reflected on [the saying 'God is Love'] a lot when I was younger. Maybe that's why I prioritise love so much. To me this statement says, "As long as you've got love, you don't need god." Some people need to worship something or need something to ascribe randomness to – they can have god. I'll worship love and dedicate myself to love thanks very much, especially if they're the same thing

anyway, what difference does it make? But I have a problem with them saying God is Love. It isn't. Love is bigger and better and more real and a better force for good than god. I think Christians piggy back on the idea of love, and stick notions of god on top and that it does love a disservice. Strip it away.'

Similarly naïve or caricatured God-concepts were offered by several participants. Julia asserts that a focus on loving attitudes and behaviour is sufficient for a good and meaningful life, and that this concept of God is an unnecessary addition. This view was echoed by several other atheist-identifying participants in this project, including those who had a slightly more open-minded or sophisticated understanding of what others might mean by 'God', which they nevertheless regarded as redundant.

4.2 Vignette #2: 'Rick' - Quaker, Genderqueer, Aged 38

['God' means] something like "love; the source of love; of lovingness; that which inspires lovingness": specifically not narrowed down to a particular type of love; including loving acts or intentions towards strangers and towards the whole world. A distributed phenomenon rather than a discrete person. I describe myself as a theist if and only if I can explain what I mean by God. Otherwise I say "it's a bit more complicated than that". I'm not agnostic because I absolutely believe that what-I-mean-by-God exists. I'm either an atheist or a theist, depending on your point of view.

"God is Love" includes behaving in a loving way to all people, not just loving the people closest in my life. When I talk about "that of God in everyone" I mean the impulse in people to do that. I am, at best, agnostic about an interventionist god or gods. I'm not entirely sure that the existence or not of an external being is a question that needs answering. I do believe in the presence of that of God in everyone; that everyone is important and sacred; that my best chance of experiencing the divine is in my interactions with other people and with the world. I think all [of my significant loving] relationships nurture in me a focus on thinking and behaving lovingly in general, not just within the relationships themselves. That is God, for me.'

Rick's response highlights the diversity of understandings of the word 'God', and also of the labels 'theist' and 'atheist', which are present amongst reflective people of faith. Such diversity was apparent in questionnaire responses even amongst people of the same religious affiliation. Rick explicitly identifies God with love, and with behaving in a loving way to all people, so their theology and their loving relationships are closely interwoven. However, it is not easy to say which came first: whether theology shaped their approach to loving relationships, or their instinctive call to love shaped their theological outlook.

4.3 Vignette #3: 'Nancy' - UU 'Pragmatic Naturalist', Female, Aged 60

'I use the word 'God' to signify something beyond, and encompassing all of, what is. I have a hunch or intuition of there being a mesh or fabric that we're all a part of and that we rarely – if ever – see. It takes too much time to say all of that, so I just use the convenient term God. [I call myself a] pragmatic naturalist. I am a pragmatist: what is most important about what we believe is not some ultimate truth claim, but if the belief enables something good to come into being in the world. Goodness lies in the expansion of love into the world through kindness and compassion. If a belief in God as a supreme ruler helps an individual to do that, then it's a true belief. It's what works that matters.

'Love' means the capacity to be vulnerable and open to another and the world in its brokenness and sweetness and to act upon that experience in ways that create greater connection and care in the world. That's where depth and meaning are best found: in our ability to see that essential interconnectedness, the truest part of our humanity. That mesh/fabric underlying reality binds us all one to another, we are interconnected on the deepest level of life. That's what God does/is. God and Love add complexity to my life and push me in ways that I often do not want to go, nudge me away from my tendency to judgement, my sarcasm and cynicism. It is a matter of faith for me that at the heart of all, God, that which binds us all together, is Love.'

Nancy acknowledges that her God-concept is based on intuition.

Her description of God as ‘beyond and encompassing all of what is’ seems to be a form of process-panentheism. Her religious outlook is pragmatic, centred on ‘goodness’, shown in kindness, compassion, and love. For Nancy, the truth of any religious belief is tested against its ability to bring about these qualities, her highest values. ‘God is Love’, in this view, means that ultimate reality can be best experienced through participating in loving behaviour, and working to build ever-deeper connections through sustained and intentional commitment to love.

5. Philosophical and Theological Reflections

It is not always clear what people are talking about when they talk about God. One possibility is that God-talk refers in a literal way to a supernatural being, which may or may not exist. Another view is that religious language refers symbolically to an underlying metaphysical essence or reality. A further possibility is that people belonging to a religious community are participating in a shared ‘language-game’ within a ‘form of life’ as famously described by Ludwig Wittgenstein.³⁰ In this case, they are using religious language in a way which does not speak about objective facts, but instead it has a different role in life, affirming ‘a certain sort of personal commitment’ and connecting their actions with whatever is of ultimate significance and value for them and the religious community that they are part of.³¹ God-talk, in this view, is embedded in a community of practice and is part of a ritualised practice of mental formation intended to deepen the understanding of human reality.³²

Considering the questionnaire responses, it was not always obvious which of these forms of God-talk each person was engaging in, and even amongst such a reflective group it is possible that people are not themselves conscious of the way in which they are using religious language. Only a few respondents, mainly atheist-identified individuals such as Julia, indicated that they understood ‘God’ as referring in a literal way to a supernatural being (one which they did not believe in). Whilst there are of course many theists who *do* use religious language in this explicitly literal manner, none participated in this research, which is not that surprising given the make-up of my social network (consisting mostly of liberal religious people who generally seem to use religious language more symbolically). Several respondents, including Nancy and Rick, made it explicit that their use of religious language was self-consciously symbolic and adopted for pragmatic and ethical reasons.

Keith Ward has done some interesting work on the use of symbolic religious language in a way that speaks to the central question of this

paper. He says: 'We should not think of the word "God" as referring to any sort of being. We might rather think of it as making possible and expressing a certain mode of apprehending our own subjective existence... To make such an assertion as "God is love" is perhaps to have discerned in our lived experience of loving and being loved by others something worth ultimate commitment.'³³ Our lived experience - perhaps our experience of love, in whatever form - may be the means by which we first intuit that there is a transcendent dimension to life. This insight opens up the possibility that love comes first; we may realise through experience that certain values are of supreme worth, and only *then* adopt a whole set of religious practices, symbols, rituals, and the attendant language to help cultivate those values. In this view, religious belief, in the sense of intellectual assent to certain propositions, is secondary to religious practice, and, to quote Ward again: 'religious practice is, or ought to be, a practice of the formation of the self in virtue, in the proper excellence of being a truly human person.'³⁴ Our experience of loving relationships may shape our understanding of God; our theology may, in turn, shape our understanding of loving relationships, in a continuous cycle. Once we have adopted this religious way of seeing the world we may then consciously seek to know God through loving. This seems to resonate with a number of questionnaire responses from liberal religious individuals. Some seem to interpret their own belief as an intuition of God as the source of reality, existing independently of the world, whilst others appear to reject, or remain agnostic about, the existence of such a metaphysical reality, and take an approach which might be described as non-realist.³⁵

Religious people who are conscious of the symbolic nature of their God-talk are free to choose different symbols and metaphors than those they have inherited. The choice is not entirely arbitrary for, as the feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson notes, 'the symbol of God *functions*... it focuses a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, and associations, very deep and tenacious. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and moulds a community's bedrock convictions and actions.'³⁶ Another influential feminist theologian, Sallie McFague, advocates an experimental and pluralistic approach to the use of religious metaphor, which she calls 'free theology', and this involves trying out a variety of new models for God.³⁷ Again, these models are not arbitrary, they must be fleshed out, their implications explored, and tested against experience.³⁸ She favours the pantheistic model - 'the world as God's body' - and says: 'I came to see how loving the world is loving God... I no longer see God off in the sky (or even as an infinite abstraction), but as the spirit of the body we call the earth. God is always everywhere with each and every smidge of creation as the loving power of life to all in their sufferings and

joys.³⁹ Several respondents made explicit reference to panentheism and this model seems to resonate with many themes which arose more generally in this research.

The biblical verse ‘everyone who loves is born of God and knows God’ (1 John 4:7), with which this paper began, suggests that we humans may know God through loving others. The questionnaire responses indicated that people found great depth, meaning, and value in loves of all kinds: through close romantic and sexual connections, including fleeting encounters, and long-term partnerships; through raising and caring for children; through the unwavering support of parents and grandparents; through intimate friendships that gave strength and practical support in challenging life circumstances; from teachers and elders who nurtured their potential and affirmed their worth; through working for social justice and a better world for people unknown; from animal companions who gave unconditional affection; even love for particular landscapes. In some cases respondents made it explicit that they found God in these experiences of love, both giving and receiving, whilst in others this was not explicitly stated. This raises the interesting question of whether some people might effectively ‘know God without knowing it’. If we humans know God through loving rightly, yet some people love rightly without consciously recognising it as a God-involving process, does it make them ‘anonymous theists’, to echo Karl Rahner?⁴⁰ This flippant inclusivism seems disrespectful of people’s right to religiously self-identify but it does draw attention to similarities between reflective theists and reflective atheists.

It is notable that people across the religious and non-religious spectrum identify similar sources of meaning, value, and depth, often involving loving relationships, connection to nature, action to make the world a better place, and creative pursuits of various kinds. However, some connect this to a larger framework of religious practice and community, and some do not. As Ward notes, ‘the difference between believers in God and non-believers is *not* one that either of them understands clearly, as if they both clearly see the options, but one person chooses to believe in one extra entity, or in more life beyond death, and the other chooses not to...’⁴¹ It seems to me that there is more common ground between reflective theists and reflective atheists than most realise or are willing to acknowledge.

Something transcendent is encountered through *agape*, *eros*, *philia*, and *all* forms of love, it seems. The forms are often mixed, and it may not be so important to distinguish them from each other, as to discern a certain quality to the love which marks it as God-involving. Thomas Oord tries to define love in a way which distinguishes instances which

are *truly* loving from those which are not: ‘to love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic/empathetic response to God and others, to promote overall well-being.’⁴² This approach hints at a useful distinction: there are ways of loving *rightly* (being in right relationship: right *eros*, right *agape*, right *philia*, etc.) and *wrongly*, and although all forms of love are *potential* channels for encounter with the divine, it is only through loving *rightly* that we may know God.

6. Summary and Conclusions

In this paper I have reflected on the saying ‘God is Love’, in the light of ‘ordinary theology’, in order to explore overlooked perspectives on an important theological issue. I have briefly reported on some research into the theological outlook and lived experience of a group of liberal religious and non-religious people and presented excerpts for focused reflection. I have suggested that – particularly for liberal religious people – intuitive theological beliefs (which may originally be derived from our cultural inheritance) are modified in the light of significant life experiences, often experiences of love, which are taken as intimations of a transcendent dimension to life. Many religious people employ religious language – and God-talk in particular – as a symbolic means of affirming and cultivating that which is most worthy of ultimate commitment in life. ‘God is Love’, in this sense, means that real, authentic, transforming love – in all its many and varied expressions – is of supreme worth and, as such, it offers a guiding principle for life, and a glimpse of the underlying nature of reality. To quote Edward Vacek: ‘Love is the heart of a person, the font of spirit, the power leading to growth, the bond tying human beings, the world and God into cosmic unity.’⁴³

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The Unchained Spirit: Kenotic Theology and the Unitarian Epic

LEWIS CONNOLLY

‘But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is it not more and more night coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God’s decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’¹ An extract from Friedrich Nietzsche’s most notable parable of the Madman.

When Nietzsche wrote these words in the late 1800s he was proclaiming the beginning of a new reality in the west. A reality in which the central pillar of people’s individual lives, and society more broadly, was no longer this concept of God. So, was Nietzsche right in making this prophetic pronouncement of God’s impending irrelevance? In some respects, it seems like he was entirely wrong. Here we are, over a century later, and in our globalised world this concept of God seems just as relevant as ever. And yet, the means by which we ‘do God’ in the west has irrevocably changed. The concept of God is no longer culturally axiomatic, an assumed aspect of our reality, but rather a concept that one must ‘choose’ to adopt or buy into.² The western world has undergone a rapid process of secularisation and pluralisation over the last century. Though individuals may still profess a faith in God, the concept of God is now always approached through the lens of our subjective selves. We choose *that* reality, as opposed to *this*.

Responding to Secularism

Essentially then, I think there are at least two responses to this secularising process. Either we as Unitarians can define ourselves in opposition to it, or we can define secularism as a natural outworking of Christianity, and as such, frame our understanding of Christianity not in

contention with secularism, but in harmony with it. In brief, this is because I think it is essential, as a religious movement, that we remain true to the language of faith as we have inherited it as Unitarians.³ An uncritical adoption of secularism would belie our credentials as a religion. It is essential that we understand ourselves as Unitarians in relation to our Unitarian forebears, and more broadly to our forebears within the narrative of the Christian epic. To do this it needs to be understood that our approach to the Christian narrative must be necessarily heretical, as a truly radical and contemporary reading of Christianity cannot, in my opinion, be otherwise. And indeed, if this were not the case, it would weaken our nonconformist credentials.

Take the Unitarian Christian leaders of a century ago, such as James Martineau and Olympia Brown. The Unitarian movement they inhabited bears little resemblance to our own contemporary context. Though we Unitarians often dwell upon our rich heritage, drawing inspiration from these, our illustrious forebears, we struggle to articulate the unfolding narrative of how we got from them to us, in particular failing to appreciate the extent to which secularisation has altered the fabric of our movement. In the last century, there has been a fundamental negation of any shared Unitarian theological identity; it has completely fallen away. The emergent amorphous movement we're left with today, as a consequence of this change, is having its own sort of existential crisis. Unable to adequately articulate a collective theological identity (assuming that to be a desirable objective to some extent), we have been thrust into a new context in which we feel uneasy with ourselves, unsure how to proceed. What I aim to do in this paper then, is nothing less than offer a narrative that makes sense of the seismic shift our movement has undergone over the last century. A narrative which reframes our movement, and its sense of identity within the broader Christian epic narrative, though as stated, in a wholly heretical fashion.

So, returning to Nietzsche: he was a devastating critic of dogmatic Christianity, though in many ways a paradoxical thinker. We can, nevertheless, get a hold to some extent on what he understood by the death of God. For Nietzsche it was the coherent framework of dogmatic Christianity, which resulted in the necessary intellectual tools which could in turn displace Christianity. Nietzsche often writes in grand terms which often come closer to poetry or mythological prose not unlike Dante, John Milton, or the Bible itself. This more artistic or mystic approach allows Nietzsche to mediate a space between what we know, what we can articulate, and a realm of knowledge beyond our immediate conception. Christianity then, developed a conception of the spirit of truth, which in turn undermined the central claims of Christianity. The 'undermining' is the death of God, an apocalyptic horizon of no return,

out of which there can be a potential burgeoning of a whole new tomorrow. For Nietzsche, the God of Christianity as he saw it was a destructive, life denying force in our world. A force which causes us to deny our very humanity, and long for a 'beyond' which isn't even there. For Nietzsche, God was like a large transcendent enemy, an enemy of all that is good in humanity, all the fullness and passion of human life. Only through God's death can humanity be liberated from these oppressive shackles and find its true liberty and joy again. Within this apocalyptic clearing of all prior certainties there emerges a new space for a new creative eruption. As Nietzsche says, the sacred is in decomposition. God is decomposing. In other words there is an unfolding process of gradual comprehension; God is dead, but the true possibilities within that death are only just beginning to be realised.

Nietzsche the Christian Prophet

For Nietzsche, given the now realised absence of our transcendent groundedness, a chaotic clearing opens before us. As the world's various creation myths have us emerge from the primordial chaos, infused with potential, so now we return to that primordial chaos and the possibility of a new dawn. The radical theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer somewhat counter-intuitively wants to understand Friedrich Nietzsche's insight here not in opposition to Christianity, but rather as echoing Christianity's radically apocalyptic message. In this way Altizer affirms Nietzsche as a contemporary Christian prophet. To regard Nietzsche in this way, suggests a reading of Christianity somewhat at variance with the mainstream. When we talk of Christianity, what are we talking about? It is the religion of a shunned and despised Jewish Rabbi. From its conception, 'the church' has been a theologically diverse community of people, proclaiming a radical message of love. The difficulty when it comes to 'Christian theology' is that it emerges out of a combative dialectical process, and as such, it necessarily has winners and losers. The orthodox mainstream takes the rather naively optimistic view that out of this combative process those who emerge as the victors are always the good guys. The absurdity of this belief sits in stark contrast alongside the fact that the focus of Christianity is a person who made a point of standing with the losers, the outcasts, the disenfranchised, the marginalised. A man who literally died at the hands of the tyrannical majority. As Christianity was transformed into an imperial religion, its truly radical impulse seeped away. As such, I take it as given that orthodox theology, and Christendom itself, must be necessarily inadequate. And perhaps more than that, an insidious force echoing Nietzsche's conception of the Christian God, the purveyor of human misery.

Reframing Theological Discourse

What is required then, is for us to reach back into the fragments of our Christian theology, and allow something new to emerge. To evaluate the central claims of Christianity, most significantly the central ‘events’⁴ of Christianity, the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus. Despite the tenets of classic Unitarianism, the crux of the epic Christian narrative is surely the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus. Though it’s perfectly valid of course to question the objective reality of such events, as I would, they take a place of primacy when informing the Christian imagination. It is necessary then, to draw a distinction between the way the world shows up to us, our human experience, and the objective world. We mustn’t overlook the fact that the passion of Christ sits at the very centre of the synoptic gospel tradition, and that Paul sees the possibility of the new creation arising out of the ending or death of the old creation, an ending Paul sees manifested in the crucifixion.⁵ The horrific and offensive crucifixion formed the basis and impetus of the Christian faith. ‘We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles’.⁶ Though I would certainly want to resist reducing Jesus’ ministry to just his coming and going, and echo something of the radical Reformation, Anabaptist tradition, and the mystical traditions, as they elevate his life and teachings. Despite this though, in mythological terms the crucifixion cannot be overlooked. As we consider then what a robust theological treatment of the cross might look like, we encounter the inadequate Unitarian treatment of the cross from a century ago, articulated by none other than James Martineau, whose theology had its heyday in the late nineteenth century, and yet whose theology still lingers on today. Given that the cross event is the very core of the Christian epic then, it should strike us as deeply problematic if this event cannot be integrated into our theological schema. How are we going to understand the cross?

I would summarise James Martineau’s theological treatment of the cross and the crucifixion in the following way: Jesus was, like you and me, a human being, a human being who had a divine mission, to reconcile first the Jews and then all of humanity to God. As a Hebrew man living in first century Israel, he was restricted in his mission by time and space. But through his death upon the cross, in quitting his mortal body, his spirit was able to in effect become immortal, and more than that, universal.⁷ His prophetic message could be carried by his people across seas, cultural and national barriers, to every corner of the earth. In this way, the cross opened the message of Jesus to the nations, his blessed way after the love of God. The death of Jesus then, as far as Martineau was concerned, was not to be imbued with any metaphysical significance in and of itself. It was not, for example, to be seen as a

ransom for the sinful state of humanity, or fulfilling some kind of predetermined plan. We are, as such, all called to be his messengers, to embody his truth, and to project it out into the world. The cross in Martineau's theology merely universalises Jesus' message.

In the late 80s and early 90s the comic book writer Alan Moore developed a new graphic novel, called *V for Vendetta*, which was later adapted in 2005 into a movie starring Hugo Weaving and Natalie Portman. It's set in the near future, in a dystopian Britain, ruled by a nationalistic, immigrant and Muslim hating police state. In this bleak and repressive society, the only beacon of hope is a vigilante wearing a Guy Fawkes mask, who orchestrates an elaborate and theatrical plot to bring down the fascist state. He stands up in the face of oppression for fairness, justice, and freedom. In a particularly harrowing scene in the movie, V withstands a barrage of bullets, and exasperated his opponent cries, 'Why won't you die?' to which V replies, 'Beneath the mask is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea Mr Creedy, and ideas are bulletproof'. I believe this scene captures perfectly the Unitarian, Martineau-esque view of Jesus. The pertinent issue is not so much *that he died*, but that behind the man there is an idea, a bulletproof idea. And that idea (in Jesus' case) is love, the sacrificial love of God, the sisterhood and brotherhood of humanity, and our individual affinity before God. Jesus points the way, towards the Kingdom of Peace, and therefore we as his hands and feet on earth must now strive to make that a reality first in our hearts, and then ultimately in the world.

I have several problems with this reading of the Christian epic, chief among which, this view of Jesus affirms the God of progress, the God of liberal values, the God of peace and kindness - all things which on the surface we would of course want to affirm. The trouble is it robs the crucifixion of any significance in and of itself. It affirms a trajectory towards wholeness and completeness which it ultimately cannot deliver. It gives us a palatable way to frame the crucifixion, and make it all about our progressive ideals. It clarifies our place and purpose within the universe far too comfortably. The death of Jesus on the cross cannot be affirmed as significant because it merely lends weight to what we already know to be true, the crucifixion is supposed to be understood as an affront that ruptures our received wisdom. This Martineau-esque view underplays the significance of Jesus' death, and fails to help us make sense of the secularising trends which have swept across our culture, and our own movement.

There is a distinct difficulty with talking about Jesus within our own movement, as we so often, as Unitarians, fall down a reductive rabbit hole, obsessing over historical particularities (such as the fact he

was just a man who lived 2000 years ago), and failing to grasp his mythological significance which far outweighs such facts. Liberal theology in general over the last century has fixated upon questions of Jesus' historicity, to the exclusion of Jesus as he has inhabited the Christian imagination. To participate in the subjective reality of Jesus has little to do with such alleged historical events. In as far as Jesus manifests in the present as a 'yes to life', he is not the historical figure of academic enquiry, but a revelation of the sacred. A revelation which reveals subjectively new emergent possibilities, possibilities which can and do go even beyond the Biblical tradition. To illustrate this point, the radical theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer often looks to the poetry of William Blake. Quoting Jerusalem: 'Awake! Awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! Expand! I am in you and you in me, mutual love divine: Fibres of love from man to man thro' Albion's pleasant land... I am not God afar off, I am a brother and friend: Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me.'⁸ Here Blake's transcendent Jesus, walking through this pleasant land – England – obviously goes beyond the Biblical tradition. In Blake's poetry the image of Jesus embodies the very breadth of the human imagination. Jesus is an immediate expression of love, presently actualised. It's all about our present reality, not a future or past reality. It's worth contrasting Blake's transcendent Jesus, his 'yes to life', with Nietzsche's perception of the God of our retrograde past, an oppressive alien other who hangs above his creation with a judgmental eye, whose death would liberate our human potential. Here, the theology of incarnation in Blake's poetry is not a single event in time, but an ongoing process, brought to bear by the Christian imagination, the incarnation being the divine taking on flesh, or emptying himself into the present. Again, this is not to make an historical claim, but express an experiential reality. Blake provides a poetic vision of incarnational theology, but in a more radical sense, an incarnational theology in which God enters the world in the present, wholly and without remainder.

Kenosis

Thomas J.J. Altizer is a fascinating theologian, an American radical theologian, who has been publishing from the 1960s onwards. His theology draws heavily upon continental philosophy, particularly the work of Georg Hegel, as it builds upon Friedrich Nietzsche. He sees the real work of theology's ongoing progress not in Christian academia, but rather in culture. He would far sooner look to the work of Milton, Blake, or Joyce to elucidate the radical core of Christianity, than to other Christian theologians. We shouldn't be surprised that fictional narratives are able to enter the hinterland of our knowing more easily than straight rational enquiry or systematic theology. As stated, the arts, broadly

defined, are able to capture something otherwise not easily articulated. This is why, I believe, a radical theology for today almost always begins with culture: film, literature, or poetry. Altizer, in his most notable and infamous book, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*⁹, attempts to construct a radical doctrine of the incarnation with use of the concept Kenosis. Kenosis, which means 'self-emptying', is a concept used by theologians to try and understand the incarnation, that the divine logos will kenosis (or self-empty) into flesh. This Greek word appears in Philippians 2:7, where the passage reads, 'Jesus emptied himself taking on the form of a slave.' It's kenosis, as understood by Hegel, that Altizer uses to construct his theology of hyper-incarnation, which finds poetic expression in Blake's poetry.

Georg Hegel's conception of kenosis relates closely to what I have already spoken about - Nietzsche's chaotic clearing. Nietzsche's Death of God, that negates one reality (prior certainties), to birth and realise the next. For Hegel then, there must be a dissolution of one reality, for the emergence of a new possibility through a forward movement process. Altizer believed the theological assertion that 'God is Dead', or the 'Death of God', in fact gets us back to a more primal form of Christianity. This assertion points us towards a mythological claim that in some sense God did once inhabit the skies. God showed up to our ancestors as a certainty, and through the incarnation, God's enfleshment in Jesus and ultimate death on the cross resulted in just that. God's death in our world, to impart himself redemptively to this world. Not holding himself back from this world, or having his divinity re-established after the events of Holy Week. The ultimate transcendent ground, therefore, ceased to exist. Dying to make a primal reconciliation with the world possible, God has died in Christ. Incarnational theology is only realised if it is absolute, partial incarnation on the other hand, is evidently not incarnation at all. Kenosis then, according to Hegel, is a process of negation, a process by which the Ground of Being becomes increasingly incarnated into the world, into flesh, and into physical matter. In psychoanalytical terms we can think of it like this: we confront that which is our greatest fear head on, that there is no ground of reality, that there is no God, and that wholeness as a human being lies in our acceptance of reality - of this reality. This is not an idolatrous claim, we do not put ourselves above God and declare his death; God itself empties itself as a loving self-sacrificial act, that the divinity of God might rest here divining humanity itself. This move subverts all questions of the transcendent, and relocates them all within the infinite present.

In 2014 Brendan Gleeson was in a movie called *Calvary*, in which Gleeson plays a priest in Ireland named Fr James, a clear thinking, well intentioned priest, overseeing a parish of incredibly dysfunctional

people. The film begins with Fr James being told anonymously in a confessional that he will die for the sins of another priest, despite being a 'good priest' himself. One character sacrificing him or herself for the greater good is a recurring theme in fiction, and that is exactly what happens in *Calvary*. Throughout the film, which mirrors closely the unfolding events of Holy Week, we move towards the inevitable death of Fr James. A death which, as Jesus shows, acts to reconcile people to God. There is a sense that Fr James is not dying needlessly, but sacrificially for his parishioners; that somehow the collective evil of all them, or perhaps even society itself, will be redeemed in his death. As the film unfolds, we the audience are invited to consider who we think the would-be-murderer is, though ultimately we are brought to a place where the question becomes incidental, for his act of cruelty is merely a manifestation of the pain or sickness of the age. As Jesus says upon the cross, 'Forgive them for they know not what they do.'

Though the film strongly emphasizes the Christian narrative motif, it does so in a contemporary fashion. There is no nod to supernaturalism whatsoever. Fr James simply articulates a selfless theology of love; he says 'I think there is too much talk about sins to be honest, and not enough talk about virtues... I think forgiveness has been highly underrated.' His modelling of forgiveness is the ultimate expression of love, a love which is not contained, but supersedes his span of life. It is, if you like, the protagonist's resurrection - his spirit of forgiveness is uncontainable. It is not incidental that a contemporary recasting of the Christian Gospel, as this film certainly is, eliminates the resurrection. Indeed, if it transpired at the very end of the movie that Brendan Gleeson was, surprise, impervious to bullets, the movie would not have been able to carry its message underscoring the redemptive power of love. Fr James confronts his death head on, accepts it, and through accepting it, there is a transformative effect on those around him. This captures Altizer's theology, that in the absence of divine assurance, all that remains is the manifesting of love wholly in the immediate present.

Today's Unitarian Sensibility

I believe within our own movement, at least subconsciously, we are now wholly within the realm of accepting the absence of any transcendent groundedness. This explains the loosening and widening our movement has undergone over the last century. As a result the amorphous movement has entered spheres of spiritual enquiry previously unimaginable, certainly unimaginable to those Unitarian ministers a century ago. We have become unhinged from one another, so adrift upon the sea of curiosity that we can no longer conceptualise a framework which could encompass us all. Now this is not wholly without merit;

there is value in affirming our togetherness despite our spiritual diversity. The trouble is we become so displaced we lose sight even of our origins, and become existentially adrift, unable to affirm any mutual cause. Plurality itself is wholly inadequate as a signifier of our identity. Pluralism for the sake of pluralism is spiritually bankrupt and has clearly failed in its attempt to become the central spoke of the movement. There is a fine line between spiritual creativity and random expressions of hollow spirituality. The difference is, Nietzsche's creative burgeoning only makes sense as an outworking from a previously established rigidity, a process of spiritual exploration has to be a movement out from an initial place of origin. Our movement emerges out from the Christian Epic Narrative, yes, but more than that, it emerges out from the mythological assertion that any transcendent groundedness has ceased to exist. There can be no metaphysical conception which unifies the Unitarian movement as a whole.

Finally then, our movement is this: a series of spokes spiralling out from a central hub, and that central hub is God in decomposition. It is a troubling image, but one that I believe does wholly encompass the movement, and more than that, wholly makes sense of the last century. The challenge for us is not to be repelled by such an image, but recognise the freedom and creative possibility such an image affords us. We confront this horrific reality, to be released into a new possibility. 'God is Dead, God remains dead, and we have killed him!'

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- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann, *The Gay Science: with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974.), p. 181.
 - 2 The Greek root for heresy 'ἄρρεσις', translates literally as 'choice' or 'thing chosen'. In our contemporary age, one must necessarily choose faith, everyone is therefore a de facto heretic.
 - 3 For more on this point see Stephen Lingwood, 'Some Foundations for Unitarian Theology' in *Unitarian Theology Conference*, ed. by David Steers, (*Faith and Freedom* For the Hibbert Trust, 2016).
 - 4 I'm using 'events' here to mean 'mythological events'.
 - 5 Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*, (Aurora: Davies Group, 2002.), p. 30.
 - 6 1 Corinthians 1:23
 - 7 James Martineau and William Rounseville Alger, *Studies of Christianity*, (Longmans: Green, 1873), p. 68.
 - 8 William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Edited by David V. Erdman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.), p. 146.
 - 9 Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, (Louisville: Westminster Press 1966).

Theology from Women's Experience

ANN PEART

When I was first asked to talk on feminist theology from a Unitarian perspective, I said yes, and only afterwards thought about the current state of feminist theology, which seems to be fading fast from both the academic scene and more popular parlance. Some of this is to do with the deconstruction of both feminist, and more particularly of the category of 'woman'. So when I suggested the title of 'theology from women's experience' I was casting myself as an old fashioned second wave feminist, and later in this paper I will address the problem of the disappearing woman. So for the first part of my talk, please indulge me and let me assume that the human categories of 'woman' and 'man' (meaning the male gender), still have at least some validity.

But first, it may be helpful to start unpacking what is meant by 'feminist theology'. Several books on the subject devote many pages to exploring possible meanings; one short definition from an online source might suffice here. It claims that, 'Feminist theology examines the history, beliefs, and practices of religious traditions from feminist perspectives'.¹ But 'feminist perspectives' needs further unpacking. By feminist I mean not just from women's experience, but with the insights of a consciousness of the ways in which patriarchal societies have been and are denying justice and voice to women. 'Perspectives' is in the plural, because there are different contexts in which this injustice is perpetrated. Feminist theologians have been increasingly reticent about definitions, and indeed have problematized much of the earlier work in the area; I shall return to this later. The description of theology as 'the examination of the history, beliefs and practices of religious traditions' is intentionally a very broad one, implying a multi-disciplinary approach, and I hope that it is one which is in sympathy with the spirit of Unitarianism.

'Theology from women's experience'. Until recently this has been very hard to find in most writings on Unitarianism, either in history or theology. If feminist theology is to do with, firstly, uncovering women's experiences and ideas, and then, secondly, exploring the ways in which these have been suppressed, a look at the way we Unitarians have told our story and formed our theology is a good place to start. If anyone is in doubt about the maleness of the picture of Unitarianism given by our historians, a glance at the indexes of works by Len Smith, Earl Morse

Wilbur or any other standard text will show that Unitarian women are almost entirely absent.² A brief analysis of the papers given at this theology conference illustrates the present situation. Of the six talks, four are by men and two by women. Of the men's talks, one is a personal reflection which uses exclusively male examples (apart from a brief appearance of Lisa Simpson) and experience. One examines theology through mainly male lenses. One examines an event in Unitarian history when all the participants seem to have been male, and one gives a gender balanced examination of evangelism. Of the two papers by women, mine is based mainly on women's experience which was requested, but includes men in the project, and the other examines models of God using mainly male references and a questionnaire in which two thirds of the participants were women. This last paper is a significant contribution to rebalancing the gender bias in our Unitarian theology, but a history or theology of British Unitarianism which gives due weight to stories and agendas of any people other than male ministers and a few influential lay men is a long way from a possibility at the moment.

Before I identify some subversive strands with this male picture, it is important to indicate why history is a significant field for feminist theology. Currently the historical picture we are given is dominated by the stories and the writings of men. The significance of this has not yet been studied in detail, but some indications of the partiality and limitations of the male story are suggested by the following observations. These literate men were generally educated in academic theology and biblical studies, and generally felt it necessary to define, promote and develop Unitarianism primarily as a system of belief. Women, on the other hand, have until comparatively recently been excluded from formal theological education, and have generally shown less interest in the niceties of doctrine. Instead, they have been much more interested in praxis; the action part of the reflection/action process, and on religious practices. The ways in which allegiance to a Unitarian community impacted on everyday life and social relations often differed according to gender. For example, it has been noted by feminist historians that particularly for middle class women, church related activities provided one of the few ways in which it was acceptable to have an agency which transcended the public/private split of Victorian society.³ The roles that women were able to play within Unitarian communities were historically very different from those taken by men; this gives women a different perspective on their faith. Feminist theology is concerned with showing how women have a voice and an agency within religious activities, so it is not sufficient to add women's writings to the prevailing male picture, as Len Smith suggested in his preface to his otherwise excellent short history of Unitarianism.⁴ It

might be helpful to indicate three different methodologies for uncovering women's roles within Unitarianism. Uncovering stories and information about Unitarian women can be described as doing 'women's history'; it adds women to the existing picture, but does not substantially change it. Doing 'feminist history', involves developing methodologies which investigate the structures which have led to women's invisibility;⁵ this becomes 'feminist theology' when the structures under investigation are part of the beliefs and practices of a particular religion; in this case Unitarianism.

We should remember that now, and probably at most times in our history, our congregations are generally made up of more women than men. Yet, for the most part, we know little of the thoughts, beliefs and experiences of these women. In this paper I will give a brief indication of one example of a subversive strand of women's writings and actions, and then go on to look at current issues of feminist theologies requiring a Unitarian response.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld⁶ is one of the four women named in *The English Presbyterians* by Gordon Bolam and others, (one of the most comprehensive histories of British Unitarianism).⁷ A brief look at her life and works shows how she managed to claim a distinctive female voice in the prevailing male hegemony. Born in 1743, she was denied the formal education given to young men, but as her father was a Presbyterian minister, schoolmaster, and then tutor at the Warrington Academy, she picked up more knowledge than most young women, and was clearly very bright. She first became known under her maiden name of Aikin as possibly the greatest women poet of her day. Later, under her married name of Barbauld, she published more widely, first making a name for herself as a pioneer in early reading books and educational material, and then branching out into both politics and religion. After the death of her husband she earned a living by writing literary criticism and editing other authors' works, and died in 1825. Some say that she did more for women's rights than Mary Wollstonecraft, her contemporary and acquaintance, but in this paper I will concentrate on her contribution to Unitarianism. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century middle class women were expected to confine themselves to the domestic sphere; it was certainly not done to speak in public or preach, though it was acceptable to teach young children and girls. Yet Barbauld has had a profound, though largely unacknowledged, influence on the British Unitarian movement. Her correspondence with her friend Joseph Priestley show their different approaches to religious matters. Priestley, as Barbauld wrote in a letter to her niece, 'followed the truth as a man who hawks follows his sport, - at full speed, looking upward, and regardless into what difficulties the chase may lead him'.⁸

Barbauld, on the other hand placed more emphasis on training feelings, and practising a life of piety. Both took their theory from David Hartley's associationist psychology. In her influential *Hymns in Prose for Children*, published in 1781, Barbauld laid out her philosophy of religious education:

The peculiar design of this publication is to impress devotional feelings as early as possible on the infant mind: fully convinced, as the Author is, that they cannot be impressed too soon, and that a child, to feel the full force of the idea of God, ought never to remember the time when he had no idea – to impress them, by connecting religion with a variety of sensible objects, with all that he sees, all that he hears, all that affects his young mind with wonder and delight; and thus by deep, strong and permanent associations, to lay the best foundations for practical devotion in future life. For he who has early been accustomed to see the Creator in the visible appearances of all around him, to feel His continual presence, and lean upon his daily protection - though his religious ideas may be mixed with many improprieties, which his correcter reason will refine away – has made large advances towards that habitual piety, without which religion can scarcely regulate the conduct, and will never warm the heart.⁹

As the hymns were in regular use in Unitarian homes and Sunday schools for over a hundred years, and were learnt by heart by a high proportion of Unitarians, including ministers such as James Martineau; their influence cannot be over-estimated. Their inculcation of trust in a benevolent God, mediated through family and nature did much to bring warmth and sensibility into the cold rationality of Priestleyite Unitarianism. Among Barbauld's many religious writings, her *Thoughts on the Devotional Taste, on Sects and on Establishments*¹⁰ is especially significant. In it she makes a case for religion being not just a matter of searching for the truth, but also a matter of habit and of taste. As she puts it 'an affair of sentiment and feelings, in the sense it is properly called devotion'. As you might imagine, this essay (published in 1775) was criticised by Priestley, and the two engaged in some prolonged discussions. Her opinion that disputes on religious subjects were detrimental to the 'operation of religious impressions'¹¹ was echoed by William Gaskell much later in the nineteenth century. She summed up her position in a letter to Nicholas Clayton, writing:

Are Philosophy and Devotion then inconsistent? No they are different views of the same subject, they require to be corrected by each other. The devotion of a mere philosopher will be cold, the religion of a mere pietist will be superstitious. But is it not owing

to our imperfect natures that these two voices do not coalesce? I believe that it is & that in another world Philosophy and Devotion will be entirely the same thing.¹²

But Barbauld's Unitarianism was not only a domestic affair. In spite of her gender, she managed to take part in the political struggle for religious liberty during her lifetime. In her reply to Gilbert Wakefield's *Enquiry into the expediency of public or social worship*,¹³ she argued for the importance of public worship, stating, 'Every time Social Worship is celebrated, it includes a virtual declaration of the rights of man'. And she campaigned for the repeal of the Test Acts with an elegant and humorous pamphlet, as if from a male dissenter, originally published anonymously. Once her authorship of this became known, she was vilified as a virago, a fishwife, an 'unsexed female', and generally unwomanly. This lasted for a couple of years, until Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 took the heat off her.¹⁴ Barbauld's fast day sermons (never preached by her, of course) were originally published anonymously; and are said to be the only known examples of such sermons written by a woman.¹⁵

So how did Barbauld manage to be so influential and prolific, in spite of the prevailing culture which severely restricted the public activities of respectable ladies? Firstly, she took great care to lead a decorous and respectable life, and to maintain her standing, and her audience, within respectable society and the rational dissenters. Secondly, especially early in her life, she used genres in which women's writing was accepted, poetry and educational writings, as well as letters. Through the medium of poetry she could then tackle more masculine subjects such as religion and politics, without creating too much antagonism. When writing on religious topics moral issues were considered acceptable subjects for women. In many of her writings she uses domestic imagery to make religious and political points, thus blurring the boundary between feminine and masculine conventions. What is clear is that it was only Barbauld's exceptional talent that allowed her to transcend the conventional barriers to women's participation in Unitarian public theology.

To return to more recent times; the early 1980s saw the start of the overtly feminist Unitarian Women's Group, and the production of *Hymns for Living*, the first denominational hymnal to take the issues of male language seriously, and in a large part to use inclusive language. The first time the Unitarian movement officially reacted to feminist theology was in 1982 when the General Assembly passed a resolution to set up a working party 'to consider the possible implications of

feminist theology in connection with the thought and worship of our denomination'. The group was to consist of equal numbers of men and women and to produce a report by 1984.¹⁶ This was called *Growing Together* and is still available to download from the GA website,¹⁷ has seven main sections: women in society, language, images of God, our record, ministry, peace, and roles of women and men in the church. Several of the sections suggested consciousness raising activities and group exercises, as well as essays, poems and other short pieces. Its list of resources gives a fairly comprehensive guide to what literature was available in the early 1980s. Over thirty years later, it is easy to critique this report in the light of later developments, but as an initiative designed to stimulate members of Unitarian congregations, it was impressive, and the fact that it is still available is testimony, either to its usefulness, or to the lack of any further British Unitarian publication on the subject.

Its introduction reminds us of the affinities between feminist theology and Unitarianism; both see religion in the context of our whole lives, and Unitarianism's freedom to search for truth enables us to pursue new insights. It describes feminist theology as working on four levels, firstly the individual as consciousness raising (available to women only), secondly inclusive language, in relation to both humans and God. Then it requires a deeper appreciation of what it calls 'feminine values and ... concepts', and finally it asserts that theology is not 'simply a matter of reasoning, argument and logic', but 'is a process which must involve feeling, imagination and activity, something which has to be done and experienced'. Time limitations preclude a more detailed examination of *Growing Together* at this stage. Both feminist theology and Unitarianism have moved on in the last 30 years. 1980s feminist theology was soon exposed as often claiming universal validity whilst actually being based on the experiences of mainly middle class white western women. Much has been written since about the differing experiences of women in other contexts, and the uncovering of complex and multiple practices of oppression. The development of both Queer theory and post-colonial theory has helped in this process.¹⁸ As Marcella Althaus Reid and Lisa Isherwood say:

At the great ecclesiastical tea party men had by tradition organised the event, deciding who would make the tea, who would pour it and who would receive it. When feminists came with their disruptive gender questions they insisted that they also could make and pour the tea. Queer theologians then came and uncovered the fact that feminists shared many assumptions with their male contenders about the essential rightness of things. Who decided that we should all be drinking tea? ¹⁹

Growing Together was rather limited in this respect, but in other places Unitarian women began to be more adventurous, particularly in the case of worship. Even in the early 80s some Unitarian women started setting their own agenda. At Golders Green Unitarians in response to the minister's Lenten sermon series on feminist theology taking themes from *Women Spirit Rising*, an American anthology edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow,²⁰ the newly formed women's group declined the invitation to reply to specific sermons, and instead created their own agenda with a midsummer service based on feminist Wicca, with the congregation seated in a circle representing the wheel of the year, much goddess imagery, and the four directions honoured. This was so successful that they were asked to do an annual service on similar lines for several years running.

To what extent the Unitarian movement as a whole took on either the theological discussion or the practical implications is debatable. There is surely more awareness of gender, though not all have taken on the need for inclusive language, especially in relation to divinity, and powerful committees are not always as balanced as they should be. The importance of language has remained crucial. If the divine, what is most important, however one describes it, is addressed and talked of in primarily male terms (such as the Lord's Prayer), women are still seen as somehow inferior to men, their self-esteem is damaged and they may feel excluded from the worship or religious activity.

Although the term Queer theology is not generally recognised within it, the Unitarian movement has made significant strides towards the recognition of gay men and lesbians, being a pioneer at national level and in many congregations of same sex partnership celebration and marriage, and is even beginning to explore issues relating to transgendered people. But our theological thinking on this has been vague and unfocussed, relying on the general principle of the worth of each human being. *Celebrating Diversity: a resource pack for Unitarian and Free Christian Leaders on sexual orientation and other equality issues* published by the GA in 2003 included a biblical reflection, but little other overt theology.²¹

In some respects this mirrors what has happened to feminist theology in academia. In the late 90s feminist theology courses seemed to flourish, but now the term is used more rarely. Partly this is due to the success of raising awareness, in that feminist considerations are now often found in biblical studies and methodology, for example, in the Luther King House Education Partnership, we started an MA module called *Ministry in the context of feminist perspectives* in 1999. This continued for under ten years, and was then stopped on the

understanding that feminist perspectives should be in all taught modules. However, I doubt that this is always made explicit.

The other development in academic feminist theology is that it has broadened its scope to include non-Christian religions, and issues of racism, post colonialism, globalisation etc. This is the line taken in the journal *Feminist Theology*, started in 1992, and still in existence. Although Unitarians have for a long time promoted interfaith dialogue and cooperation, and many have embraced some non-Christian belief and practices, this has not usually been subject to a feminist analysis. My impression is that much interfaith work is still dominated by the male hierarchy, especially when it involved church leaders. I remember an occasion when as General Assembly President in 2011 I attended such a gathering in London. After several speeches by various men, we were sent off in groups of a dozen or so for discussion. I was the only woman in my group, and to move things on from generalities like 'we have differences in belief and practices but share common ethics', I brought up our Unitarian promotion of same sex partnerships. This certainly livened things up, and the only person who came to my defence was the orthodox Jew, who said that while his organisation disapproved of homosexuality, he saw that recognising its acceptance could be valuable as a human right.

One particular aspect which is an important element of any work of liberation theology is the need to listen to those who are usually marginalised, oppressed or silenced; for people in these groups generally know more than those in the dominant group. Bell hooks has illustrated how those living on the margin yet working for the people in power have access to two different world views, and so have more knowledge than those in power.²²

Two areas in which there have been considerable developments in feminist thought are firstly gender issues and secondly ecofeminist theologies. *Growing Together*, in its section entitled *What is Male? What is Female?* gave exercises listing qualities such as gentleness, endurance, leadership, and jobs, and asked people to discuss whether they thought of them as male or female and then discuss their findings. There was no discussion of the extent to which gender is a biological or a cultural product, except for a piece from Latin America which begins, 'For every woman that is tired of being a weak person when she knows she is strong there is a man who is tired of looking strong when he feels vulnerable', and continues with similar contrasts. Later work has made a distinction between biological sex and cultural gender,²³ and then gone on to problematize even this. Much has been made of subjectivity and agency, the extent to which a person feels recognised and empowered,

and the emphasis is often on gendered subjects, that is on individual people in all their complexity. Some feminists have gone down the route of French thinkers like Irigaray, who have rejoiced in 'difference'.²⁴ However, on the whole, freeing gender both from biological essentialism and from any emphasis on categorisation has allowed more detailed examination of the practices which lead to gendered cultures. For theologians this can be developed to show how discriminatory practices can be modified in order to embody greater justice and love. Embodiment has been a continuing strand in feminist theology, as it does away with the old mind/body split leading to man/woman dualisms, and grounds theological work in lived experience, with the body as a site of knowledge. This leads to a more holistic understanding of both theology and gender.²⁵

One word which did not appear in *Growing Together* is sexuality: to some extent this was rectified by *Celebrating Diversity*, but there is still work to be done, especially on the fluidity of both identity and sexuality.

Growing Together also failed to encompass ecofeminist theologies. Since 1984 most people have become aware of the importance of the earth's ecosystems and issues like global warming and its consequences. The theological assumptions which have played a significant part in this, (like man being given dominion over the earth) have also got some attention, but the connection to feminist concerns has not always been recognised. Rooted in the lives of women who have experienced the effects of pollution, soil erosion, flooding, in addition to the usual discrimination within gendered cultures, work at the intersection of ecofeminism and religion has become increasingly important.²⁶ The early religious assumption of affinity between women and nature, and patriarchal domination of both, carries on in many subtle ways (or not so subtle if we look at the current President of the USA). The inadequacy of the stewardship model carries on this male model of dominance, and needs to be replaced with more integrated models. The world as God's body as developed by Grace Jantzen and Sallie McFague is one such possibility.²⁷ A multi-disciplinary approach is needed to uncover the complexity of the interrelating issues. The concerns which have been most prevalent in feminist theology are especially relevant; embodiment, power with rather than power over, alternatives to violence. Surely war is one of the biggest polluters, as well as taking up vast amount of money and the occasion of much rape and other violence against women.

It may well be that the old emphasis on differences between men and women needs to be replaced by a more nuanced recognition of

gendered subjects, but while women the world over continue to have a lesser status than men, to be poorer, to bear the brunt of climate change and suffer abuse and violence, the need to uncover the varied levels of discrimination and oppression, characterised by patriarchal thinking and often underpinned by religious belief and practices, is still with us.

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Early Unitarians and Islam: revisiting a ‘primary document’

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Introduction

This paper is primarily concerned with a meeting that never happened and a letter that was never delivered. On the face of it, hardly a promising subject but one that is of far greater significance than it might, at first, appear.

Sometime in the summer of 1682, just as a Moroccan ambassador was about to leave for home after a lengthy and successful visit to England,¹ some Unitarians in London attempted to deliver a bundle of papers to him. On hearing that they were concerned with religious matters, he declined to accept them, and so, unread, they passed into the hands of the Master of the Ceremonies, Sir Charles Cotterell, and from him to a Church of England priest, Thomas Tenison. When, over a decade later, Tenison became Archbishop of Canterbury, they found their way into the holdings of the library of Lambeth Palace, where they can still be consulted today.² They rarely are. Indeed, the bulk of the material remains in the Latin in which it was originally composed. Although a few scholars have discussed this ‘curious case’,³ mostly in passing, and the occasional work of contemporary Unitarian literature does refer to it,⁴ though not always accurately,⁵ the incident is largely forgotten.

But there are good grounds for believing that it is far from inconsequential. For example, Alexander Gordon, the great Unitarian historiographer, could claim that the *Epistle Dedicatory*, the covering letter that accompanied three longer treatises,⁶ as part of the Unitarians’ submission, should be called the ‘primary document of Unitarianism’⁷ because it was ‘the first time, so far as is known, the term Unitarian was employed in an English document’.⁸ More specifically, it used ‘the Unitarian name in its broadest scope, as denoting all who believe in an “onely Sovereign God (who hath no distinction or plurality in persons)”’.⁹ For Gordon it marked the beginning of a stage when Unitarianism became ‘a comprehensive school of thought’ and it transitioned from the ‘sporadic Antitrinitarianism’ of preceding centuries,¹⁰ laying the foundations for the eventual emergence of the Unitarian denomination in the British Isles.

Although Gordon was, in one sense, wrong – the term ‘Unitarian’ had been used almost a decade earlier and in a comparable manner in a publication by Henry Hedworth¹¹ – the mere fact that he valued that text so highly justifies re-examining it today, but, as I hope will become apparent, there are other grounds for thinking again about this unusual document.

There are many ways that the *Epistle Dedicatory* could be scrutinised but for now I would like to restrict myself to what can be gleaned by reading it within what we know of the wider context of early Unitarian interpretations of Islam. But before doing this, it is important to give a brief summary of the letter’s contents.

The *Epistle Dedicatory*: Contents

After some initial flattering remarks about the ambassador, the letter begins by the authors identifying themselves as belonging to ‘the Sect of Christians called Unitarians’ and congratulating the ambassador and his retinue for being ‘fellow Worshippers of that sole Supreme Deity of the Almighty Father and Creator’, and, unlike Christians in the ‘Western part of the world’, preserving ‘the excellent Knowledge of that Truth touching a belief on an only Sovereign¹² God (who hath no Distinction or Plurality in Persons).’¹³ The ambassador is then informed of the letter of Ahmet Ben Abdalla, which dates from earlier in the century, a work that both expounds Islamic beliefs and attacks both Catholicism and Protestantism, and the Latin text of which they have included as the second document in their collection.¹⁴ However, the authors complain, ‘such errors, we Unitarians, do abhor as well as the Mahometans, in which we must agree in such even against our fellow Christians’,¹⁵ and so they have also submitted two further treatises in which they claim to:

First...to set forth ... in what points all Christians do generally agree with the Mahometans in matters of religion. 2ndly In what things Christians Universally disagree from you with the reasons for the same. 3rdly. In what cases you do justly dissent from the *Roman Catholics*. 4Thly.The Protestant Christians do joyn with you in your condemning of the Romish errors, and theirs and our reasons for the same. 5thly. [...] in what Articles, we the *Unitarian Christians* do solely concur with you Mahometans [...] [I]n the 6th place [...] undertake to discover unto you [...] those weak places that are found in the platform of your Religion; and [...] offer to your Consideration some Materials to repair them.¹⁶

The rest of this initial letter consists of the anonymous authors, who describe themselves as ‘two single Philosophers’ and ‘Orators of the Unitarians’¹⁷ claiming that they speak on behalf of ‘a great and considerable People’,¹⁸ making a case for the antiquity of their form of Christianity¹⁹ and its distinction from ‘those backsliding Christians named Trinitarians’,²⁰ and explaining that, although plentiful elsewhere, ‘in the West and North we are not so numerous, by reason of the inhumanity of the clergy.’²¹ They conclude the letter with an offer to visit Morocco to discuss its contents with ‘the Learned of your Country’.²²

As is perhaps already apparent, this epistle includes a strikingly positive estimation of Islam in relation to Christianity. The authors evidently have a high regard for the faith of Muslims, indeed they include them at the end of a list of Christian churches that ‘maintain with us the faith of One Sovereign God’, saying ‘And why should I forget to add you Mahumetans’?²³ They also have a high estimation of Muhammad, as someone who was raised up by God as a ‘Scourge of the idolizing Christians’ (the Trinitarians),²⁴ and whom they seem to accept as a ‘Preacher’ of the ‘Gospel of Christ’²⁵. Indeed, so exalted is their estimation of him that they cannot believe that he is responsible for the ‘many and frequent repugnancies, as are to be seen in those Writings and Laws that are nowadays giv’n out under his name.’²⁶

It should be noted that despite what is said in the *Epistle Dedicatory*, the Unitarian treatises submitted with the *Epistle* do not systematically address the topics enumerated; indeed, some are barely touched upon. For example, there is only one occasion where an interpolation in the Qur’an is identified and the grounds for judging it to be so are explained (the text discussed is Sura 4.157 which concerns the Qur’anic claim that Jesus only seemed to have been crucified).²⁷ The two Latin Unitarian treatises are far from polished and were clearly written in a rush; as the authors say, they have ‘ten times more to urge on the Same subject that we present’ and that the papers were the work of a ‘few days’.²⁸

The *Epistle Dedicatory*: Context

To make sense of the letter, it is helpful to understand something of the relationship between early Unitarians and Islam that this letter both reflects and also seeks to develop.

On the one hand early Unitarians regularly found themselves described as being virtually synonymous with Muslims, as ‘more Mahometan than Christian’,²⁹ with the Racovian Catechism dismissed as the ‘Racovian Alcoran’.³⁰ An important antitrinitarian writing, Arthur

Bury's *Naked Gospel* (1690), could be accused of being so like the Qur'an that it amounted to no more than 'a Commentary on that Text'.³¹

There was a clear attempt to associate this form of dissent with a religion that was largely viewed as a work of 'imposture', something dangerously alluring but blasphemous, diabolical, and – given the dominance of the Ottoman empire and anxiety about the depredations of Barbary slavers – physically threatening.³² To get some sense of the nature of the dominant, hostile discourse concerning Islam and Muslims in this period in England one need only read the 'Needful Caveat' that accompanied the first English translation of the Qur'an which appeared in 1649. In it the reader is told that the Qur'an is made up of '1. Of Contradictions. 2. Of Blasphemies, 3. Of ridiculous Fables. 4. Of Lyes'.³³ Or note the title of one of the first books in Arabic translated into English, William Bedwell's *Mohammedis Imposturae: That Is, A Discovery of the Manifold Forgeries, Falshoods, and Horrible Impieties of the Blasphemous Seducer Mohammed with a Demonstration of the Insufficiencie of His Law, Contained in the Cursed Alkoran* (1615). Or take a cursory look at one of the captivity narratives that were so popular in the period and recounted the horrors of falling into the hands of North African pirates.³⁴ Given the widespread hostility towards Islam, it was a damning association to make. Some evidence of this is seen in Leslie's polemical accusation that the only reason Socinians did not openly acknowledge Muhammad as one of their fathers was because 'the people would stone you for they all have a great aversion to Mahomet.'³⁵

In some ways this was a continuation of long tradition of orthodox polemic against antitrinitarians that went back as far as Servetus, as well as the early years of the Transylvanian movement, as opponents sought to deny their Christian status and claimed that they preached a 'Turkish Christ'.³⁶ It was not something exclusive to Unitarians – such accusations could be made of other dissenters too – Quakers for example³⁷ – and Unitarians could find themselves being accused of being Jews, pagans, atheists and papists as well as Muslims,³⁸ but the accusation that they were really Muslims, or 'much more Mahometans than Christians',³⁹ was extremely common in relation to Unitarians, and more than any other group.

Such language reflected the common assumption, found even on occasions where they were not targets of polemic, that antitrinitarian Christianity had a strong affinity with Islam.⁴⁰ Indeed, somewhat later, we can find Gibbon using the term 'Unitarian', in his famous *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, to refer to Muhammad,⁴¹ picking up on language that can be found at the beginning of the eighteenth century, if not before.⁴²

Indeed, as the authors of the *Epistle Dedicatory* had noted, Socinianism had thrived under Islamic rule,⁴³ and rather than this being evidence of the intolerance of trinitarians, as the letter and other Unitarian literature claimed,⁴⁴ their critics saw this as conclusive proof that the Unitarians were Muslims in all but name.⁴⁵ For its opponents, Socinianism was virtually indistinguishable from Islam, the differences largely ‘imperceptible’.⁴⁶

However, even more concerning, it was claimed that Unitarianism ‘makes way for Mahometanism’,⁴⁷ that Unitarianism inevitably led from Christianity to Islam. As Thomas Calvert remarked, ‘If any Christians turne Mahometans they begin with Arianisme, and Socinianisme, and then Turcisme is not so strange a thing.’⁴⁸ And, as conclusive proof of this, famous converts from antitrinitarianism to Islam were paraded as proof, notably Adam Neuser and Paul Alciat⁴⁹ – although actually it was only true of the former,⁵⁰ a prominent Reformed Protestant theologian from Heidelberg.⁵¹ Such a perception does not seem to have been one held solely by trinitarian Christians, as Ottoman Muslims expressed much the same view. Leibniz, for example, recounted reading about how a Turk, on hearing a Polish Socinian talk about his faith, wondered why he did not get circumcised and become a Muslim.⁵²

Indeed, Socinianism was often described as even worse than Islam from the perspective of orthodox Christians. Although both made use of similar arguments against the trinity⁵³ theologically, Unitarianism could be judged as even more inadequate in its understanding of such things as Christology or predestination;⁵⁴ as Whitaker put it, in his *The Origin of Arianism*, written towards the end of the eighteenth century, ‘The truth is, that even Mahomet himself, weak and wicked as he was, never ventured out into the high blasphemies of Socinianism.’⁵⁵ It was also thought worse because it was potentially more dangerous than Islam, causing Christianity to be destroyed from within.⁵⁶

But it is also important to note that although the claims about the affinities between Unitarianism and Islam were intended to be damning, they were not always understood that way by Unitarians themselves. Although some could be ‘enraged’ by the association with Islam,⁵⁷ William Freke, for example, was happy to praise Muhammad and the Qur’an for defending the unity of God against the errors of trinitarian Christians,⁵⁸ and Stephen Nye could talk favourably about Muhammad as someone who set out ‘to restore the Belief of the Unity of GOD, which at that time was extirpated among the Eastern Christians, by the Doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation [...] Mahomet meant not his Religion should be esteemed a new Religion, but only the Restitution of the true Intent of the Christian Religion’.⁵⁹ Bury could say that

‘Mahomet professed all the articles of the Christian faith’.⁶⁰

Indeed, as some of their critics accurately observed, founding figures within Socinianism more generally had been happy to both acknowledge that the Qur’an contained the same message of the unity of God that they proclaimed,⁶¹ and to make use of the Qur’an to support their case. Francis David, for example, used it support his non-adorationist understanding of Jesus,⁶² and both Servetus and Socinus⁶³ made some use of it too. As the Unitarian historiographer of the Polish radical reformation, Stanislas Lubieniecki, could say of Servetus, he ‘sucked honey even out of the very thistles of the Koran’⁶⁴ in arriving at his doctrine, and in his famous trial in Geneva in 1553 he had to defend his use of the Qur’an to support his theological thought.⁶⁵ La Croze, the French critic of Socinianism, could claim, with some justification, that Unitarians, in the infancy of their sect, ‘cited the Alcoran as one of the Classick Books of their Religion’,⁶⁶ even if later followers were rather more reticent in acknowledging this debt.⁶⁷

The *Epistle Dedicatory* clearly reflects the major tropes that characterised the relationship between Unitarianism and Islam as understood by early Unitarians. It is, in most respects, not innovative but rather representative of early Unitarian views, notably in the way it identifies fundamental commonalities between the two religions, embracing rather than rejecting something central to anti-Unitarian polemic. It was, however, clearly different in some significant respects.

I) Much antitrinitarian writing, whilst praising elements of Islamic belief and practice nonetheless repeated age-old calumnies against Muhammad. Bury, for example, despite his positive appraisal of Muhammad as a reformer who restored the true Christian gospel, could call him ‘a lewd brainsick Scoundrel and his Doctrines (as far as they are His) no better than extravagant whimsies, or lewd panders to lust’ – repeating a number of common pejorative epithets.⁶⁸ The *Epistle Dedicatory* contains no such slanders, and Muhammad is praised as a man of ‘judgement’ and, as we have noted, a ‘Preacher’ of the ‘Gospel of Christ’.⁶⁹

II) The treatment of Muhammad and Islam found in the *Epistle Dedicatory* was unusual in being so sustained. Most antitrinitarian writings, especially English ones, only touched on the subject of Islam briefly, with the notable exception of Henry Stubbe’s *The Originall & Progress of Mahometanism*,⁷⁰ in which ‘Trinitarian Christianity is dismissed as hopelessly corrupt and false in favour of Islam, which is represented as the religion of Christ and the Apostles’⁷¹ or John Toland’s *Nazarenus: Or, Jewish, Gentile, and Mahometan Christianity* (1718).

III) The *Epistle Dedicatory* was also distinctive in the audience that it addressed. Antitrinitarian texts that mention Islam were almost invariably written to other Christians. The only exception to this is Adam Neuser's famous letter to Sultan Selim II in 1570 (and possibly some writings by Jacob Palaeologus).⁷²

IV) The positive valuation of Islam combined with the critical approach towards Islamic texts within the letter is exceptional. The fact that the Unitarians were acting in the same way in respect to both the Bible and the Qur'an was something that even their opponents thought worthy of note,⁷³ and clearly set them apart from the likes of Henry Stubbe.⁷⁴ It is especially interesting that de Versé, the 'agent' of the Unitarians named by Tenison as the figure who delivered the papers, was very much at the forefront of these developments, as both the translator into Latin of Richard Simon's important historical-critical work on the Old Testament, *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament*,⁷⁵ and someone with a reputation as a radical biblical critic.⁷⁶

Conclusion

There is much more than can be said. Clearly the *Epistle Dedicatory* does merit careful scrutiny. However, I would like to leave you with some observations about the consequences of examining this text.

As we have noted, Gordon was technically wrong to call the *Epistle Dedicatory* the 'primary' document of Unitarianism as Hedworth had used the term 'Unitarian' a decade earlier. Indeed, Unitarians, for most of their history, have been reticent about being associated with it. It was their opponents, beginning with Charles Leslie in 1708, who published it, not Unitarians, and they did this to stigmatise the movement and its leaders:⁷⁷ Priestley found it quoted against him,⁷⁸ and it was used as part of a campaign to smear the Unitarian version of the New Testament published by Thomas Belsham in 1808 and as grounds for excluding Unitarians from membership of Bible Societies.⁷⁹ It was even quoted in the House of Lords as part of a successful attempt to have Unitarians debarred from being trustees of a major charity as late as 1839.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, however reluctant Unitarians have been to acknowledge the *Epistle Dedicatory*, it would be hard to say that it did not deserve a place in any reasonable narrative of Unitarian origins. Surely, at the very least, McLachlan was right to say that it represents 'the growth of a new self-consciousness' within Unitarians.⁸¹ If that is the case, in the light of the above, we need to recognise how exceptional the letter really is, and so, by implication, how exceptional is the story of the birth of English Unitarianism. There is no other example of the

genesis of a major Christian movement in which Islam, or indeed any other non-Christian religion, was a central, defining interlocutor, other than the birth of the early Christian church itself – although even there the parallel breaks down, as Christianity was initially a messianic sect *within* Judaism.⁸² At the very least the story of the origins of early English Unitarianism is not solely one of intra-Christian struggles, of arguments about reason and the scripture – or rather not solely *Christian* scripture.

The *Epistle Dedicatory* is a far from easy text for modern Unitarian readers. Its presuppositions about God and Christianity are not central to the lived religion of many of its contemporary adherents. The notion that other religions, let alone their sacred texts, have weaknesses that Unitarians can repair, might seem a little insensitive at best. And despite the positive language about Muhammad and the emphasis upon the commonality of belief between Muslims and Unitarians, ultimately the authors of the *Epistle Dedicatory* intended to convert the ambassador and his compatriots to Unitarian Christianity, again probably not something that sits comfortably amongst many contemporary Unitarians and their liberal religious sensibilities. Other models of Unitarian engagement with Islam in the past, such as the ‘cultural enmeshment’ identified by Ritchie in Hungary and Transylvania in the sixteenth century, and the importance of recognising a ‘paradigm of shared understanding’,⁸³ may well have more contemporary utility.

Nonetheless, however awkward this piece of Unitarian history is, the *Epistle Dedicatory* does show how innovative, bold and disturbing radical dissent can be, how it can envisage relationships and commonalities that go beyond the limits of the prevailing thinking and practice of the time. And that, surely, makes it a text of considerable value today.

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- 1 For the ambassador ibn Haddu’s visit see Wilfrid Blunt, *Black Sunrise; the Life and Times of Mulai Ismail, Emperor of Morocco, 1646-1727* (London: Methuen, 1951), pp. 190–96; Caroline Stone, ‘An “Extremely Civile” Diplomacy’, *Saudi Aramco World*, 63.1 (2012), 16–23; Tazi ‘Abd al-Hadi al-, ‘Muhammad ibn Haddu’, *Academia*, 2 (1985), 55–80. For an example of the positive estimation of Haddu see John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. by Austin Dobson, 3 vols (London: MacMillan, 1906), iii, pp. 77–78.
 - 2 Lambeth Palace Library MS Tenisoniani 673. The volume is entitled *Systema Theologiae Socinianaee*.
 - 3 Martin Mulsow, ‘The “New Socinians”: Intertextuality and Cultural Exchange in Late Socinianism’, in *Socinianism And Arminianism: Antitrinitarians, Calvinists, and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Martin Mulsow and Jan Rohls (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 49–78 (p. 60).

- 4 For example, George Chryssides, *The Elements of Unitarianism* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1998), p. 68; Susan Ritchie, 'The Pasha of Buda and the Edict of Torda: Transylvanian Unitarian/Islamic Ottoman Cultural Enmeshment and the Development of Religious Tolerance', *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, 30 (2005), 36–54 (p. 43); Susan Ritchie, *Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam* (Boston MA: Skinner House Books, 2014), p. 28; Leonard Smith, *The Unitarians: A Short History*, 2nd edn (Arnside: Lensden Publishing, 2008), pp. 58–59.
- 5 Ritchie is incorrect to say that the 'only trace of its existence' was preserved by Leslie (Ritchie, 'The Pasha of Buda', p. 43).
- 6 The treatises were: (a) the *Epistola Ameth Benandala Mahumetani*, an excerpt from an earlier work of Muslim apologetics by Muhammad Alguazir, entitled *Apologia contra la ley Cristiana*, which is, itself, dependent upon the apologetic works of Muhammad al-Sanūsī. See Gerard Wiegers, 'Al-Andalusi Heritage in the Maghreb: The Polemical Work of Muhammad Alguazir (fl. 1610)', in *Poetry, Politics, and Polemics: Cultural Transfer Between the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa*, ed. by Zwartjes Otto, Geert Jan van Gelder, and Ed de Moor (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 107–132; (b) *Animadversiones in praecedentem epistolam*, which consists of a series of observations on the preceding treatise, from an antitrinitarian perspective; (c) *Theognis Irenaeus Christiani lectori salutem*, which takes the form of a sustained antitrinitarian polemic, written under the name of an Arian bishop of Nicaea from the fourth century. The author claims that it was commissioned to be a preface to a commentary on the *Epistola Ameth Benandala Mahumetani*.
- 7 Alexander Gordon, 'The Primary Document of English Unitarianism', *Christian Life*, 18 September 24th (1892), 464–65; October 1 (1892), 476–77; October 29 (1892), 523–24; Alexander Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (London: Philip Green, 1895), pp. 22–23.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 11 Henry Hedworth, *Controversy Ended* (London: Francis Smith, 1673), p. 53.
- 12 I have retained the spelling of the original document which is not always consistent.
- 13 Charles Leslie, *The Socinian Controversy Discuss'd* (London: G. Strahan, 1708), p. v.
- 14 A Lutheran theologian, Zacharias Grape, subsequently published a version of it with a refutation. See Zacharias Grapius, *Ahmet Ben-Abdala Mohammedani Epistola Theologica de Articulis Quibusdam Fidei* (Rostock: Nicolai Schwiegerovii, 1705).
- 15 Leslie, *Socinian Controversy*, pp. vi, xii.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. vi–vii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. vii.

- 25 Ibid., p. viii.
- 26 Ibid., p. viii.
- 27 Lambeth Palace Library MS Tenisoniani 673: 36r-v. For a discussion of this see Martin Mulsow, 'Socinianism, Islam and the Radical Uses of Arabic Scholarship', *Al-Qanṭara*, 31 (2010), 549–86 (pp. 572–76).
- 28 Leslie, *Socinian Controversy*, p. viii.
- 29 Ibid., p. xxv.
- 30 Francis Cheynell, *The Divine Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (London: T.R. and E.M., 1650), p. 422.
- 31 Thomas Long, *An Answer to a Socinian Treatise, Call'd The Naked Gospel* (London: Randal Taylor, 1691), p. 12.
- 32 Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558-1713* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 232.
- 33 Alexander Ross, 'A Needful Caveat or Admonition', in *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, ed. by Anon. (London: s.n., 1649), pp. Eer–Ff3v (p. Ff2r).
- 34 For a helpful collection, see *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*, ed. by Daniel J. Vitkus (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001).
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Dialogues of Faith: An Adamsian Approach to Unitarian Evangelism

STEPHEN LINGWOOD

Three Conversations

One

It was the summer of 2008. I had just finished my ministry training and spent the summer travelling in the United States. In New York City I stayed in a youth hostel: basic, cheap, but right in the middle of Manhattan. I shared a room of bunk beds with several other men.

I got talking to one of them. He was not a traveller like me but a Manhattan resident whose apartment was being fumigated and so he was staying in the hostel for cheap accommodation for a few days. He was, in fact, one of the most interesting people I have ever met. He described to me a moment of conversion he experienced a few years earlier when he had given up a highly paid job in a bank, moved to New York, and now worked full-time as a life model in the many art schools of Manhattan. He was much poorer and much happier. We talked about New York, about American politics, about race, and about faith.

When he found out that I was just about to start work as a minister of religion he talked to me about his own faith and spirituality. He wasn't attached to any orthodox tradition but he had thought a lot about his sense of spirituality and the way he tried to live his life. It was a conversation that sticks in my mind. I effectively got a whole sermon out of the words he spoke to me that day. I asked him permission to share them and he gave it.

Two

‘What do you think it means to be a Christian then?’

I was sitting in a cafe in Bolton town centre as heavy rain fell outside. I was having a coffee and a chat with a young woman who had come to Chapel a few times. She had explored different religions

through her life and was full of intelligent questions. We had arranged to meet to have a longer chat than was usually possible in the busyness of a Sunday.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘Personally I consider myself to be a Christian, a liberal Christian, a radical Christian, a Unitarian Christian; and that’s because I find the words of Jesus to be the most profound spiritual teaching that I am aware of. When I try to live my life by those teachings I think I become a better human being. That’s why Unitarians have always talked about the teaching *of* Jesus, rather than the teaching *about* Jesus.’

‘Thanks,’ she said thoughtfully... and the conversation continued.

Three

‘Why are you doing this?’

This was the question I was asked at 2 a.m. one Saturday night/Sunday morning. I was standing on a bustling street in Bolton town centre. The thud-thud of dance music was rattling the windows of the bar next to me. The cold night was full of diversely dressed drunk people, taxis trying to make their way between them, and neon lights. I was standing with two other people in high-visibility jackets with the words ‘Bolton Street Angels’ emblazoned on our backs. A friendly soul had struck up a conversation with us as they made their way to a kebab shop.

‘Well,’ I replied, ‘Our volunteers do it for lots of different reasons. But I do it because that’s my church right there,’ I said pointing to the dark stone building at the side of the road, ‘And we say our purpose is to engage with the world, to love our neighbour, and this is our neighbourhood right here, so we want to make sure everyone is safe in our neighbourhood.’

I have described these three real-life conversations because I think each of them are examples of evangelism, or as I would like to put it, evangelical dialogue. They all occur in different contexts and the nature of each of them is different. But in each of these conversations there is a genuine dialogue of faith. That, I would argue, is the essence of evangelism.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the nature of evangelism, the ethics of evangelism, and particularly to explore what evangelism should look like when done by Unitarians.

What is evangelism?

What is evangelism? Listing common-usage synonymous words and phrases gives us some ideas:

- making religious converts
- proselytising
- recruitment
- witnessing
- sharing one's faith
- saving souls
- proclaiming the gospel
- pushing the faith
- peddling the faith
- propaganda¹

Many of these words and phrases have negative connotations of course. And many of them do not seem to fit with Unitarianism. We Unitarians are much more likely to talk about 'church growth' than evangelism; and perhaps we might be more comfortable with that language. The problem with that, however, is that evangelism is not the same thing as church growth. Evangelism is a *practice*, something we concretely do, which may or may not lead to church growth.

So is it possible to come to an understanding of *Unitarian* evangelism? Christian missiologist David Bosch defines evangelism as 'the activities involved in spreading the gospel.'² Could such a definition be used by Unitarians? Perhaps. The nearest thing I've found to a recent definition of Unitarian evangelism is by the American John Morgan who wrote, 'Evangelism is sharing our dream with others in order to transform the world.'³

This language is softer, but still I believe, inadequate in crafting an explicitly Unitarian definition of evangelism. This definition, along with most others sees evangelism as primarily *proclamation*. It is a message given. It is something communicated in one direction.

Yes, evangelism does involve having something to say, but I think from a Unitarian perspective the idea of proclamation is ultimately inadequate. Unitarian theology requires us not simply to soften orthodox Christian definitions but rather to see the practice of evangelism in a quite different way. As I will explore below I believe Unitarian evangelism must be some form of *two-way* communication. Evangelism must be listening as well as speaking. Unitarian evangelism must be a *dialogue*. It must be a dialogue with the outsider, a person or group

beyond the immediate faith community. It must also be a *faith* dialogue, a dialogue when people talk about what most matters to them, that in which they have trust and faith, about ultimate concern.

So the initial definition of evangelism I want to propose is that evangelism is a faith dialogue with the outsider where there is an openness to transformation. What this means will become clearer as we consider in more depth the practice of evangelism.

How should we do evangelism ethically?

A friend of mine recently described to me an experience with Mormon missionaries at her door. She said they were friendly and polite, and she had a good talk with them for ten minutes. They invited her to a church event. She politely declined, saying she wasn't religious and she really wasn't interested. They invited her to another event. Again she declined. Eventually she had to be insistent. She took a leaflet, but firmly ended the conversation and closed the door.

As she later described this conversation to me she said that, although polite, she felt the missionaries were pushy, did not take no for an answer; and ultimately she felt they might be manipulative in the way they were operating.

I am sympathetic to these objections. Many people are critical of evangelism because they have experienced evangelism being done badly. They have experienced evangelism that is coercive, aggressive, hypocritical, non-consensual, emotionally manipulative, and intellectually dishonest.

But what I want to argue today is that this does not make evangelism itself an unethical practice. It simply means that evangelism is often done in a less than ethical way. This is a nuance that is rarely discussed by anyone in either common conversation or academic discourse. Writers on evangelism tend to either unquestionably believe it is a bad thing, or unquestionably assume it is a good thing. Whereas I believe we must admit that evangelism could be a very good thing, but also could be a pretty awful thing. And we must make a clear distinction between ethical evangelism and unethical evangelism, between good evangelism and bad evangelism. Fortunately the ethicist Elmer Thiessen in the book *The Ethics of Evangelism* has already pursued this question and I'd recommend this book for an in-depth investigation into this question. For now I would want to say that I agree with Thiessen on the need to distinguish between good evangelism and bad evangelism.

So what makes good evangelism? In some ways this is a fairly easy question to answer as commonly agreed standards of ethics can be applied to the practice of evangelism. Good evangelism is honest and truthful, respects the integrity of individuals, is not abusive or manipulative, and contributes to human flourishing. These are commonly agreed standards of human behaviour. It is not difficult to apply them to evangelism and to call out anything that does not meet these standards as unethical evangelism.

How should we do evangelism Unitarianly?

Having set out some basic ethical standards for evangelism, to which I would like to hold *all* people in society, I'd now like to go deeper into exploring what evangelism looks like if it explicitly grows out of Unitarian commitments. In pursuing this question I want to argue that means and ends should be in harmony. This is a point made by theologian Bryan Stone, in arguing that the Christian gospel is one of peace, therefore the practice of evangelism should be a peaceful and non-violent one. He argues, 'Christian evangelism refuses every violent means of converting others to that peace, whether than violence is cultural, military, political, spiritual, or intellectual.'⁴ Equally the very nature of Unitarianism needs to show us *how* we should be carrying out the practice of Unitarian evangelism.

How can we understand the nature of Unitarian faith? One of the most comprehensive answers to this question is a very useful essay by American Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams. Adams argued for 'five smooth stones of religious liberalism.'⁵ These were:

1. Revelation is continuous
2. Relations between persons ought to rest in free consent and not coercion
3. The need to work for a just and loving world
4. The need for ideas to be incarnated in concrete communities
5. An ultimate attitude of hope

To these I would like to add a sixth, which is also key to the thought of James Luther Adams, though not included in that particular essay:

The need for transformation or radical change

I believe that these six principles provide a powerful foundation for Unitarian evangelism. Each of them can be used to concretely suggest how we should do evangelism as Unitarians. They provide us with an Adamsian approach to Unitarian evangelism.

1. Revelation is continuous

The key Unitarian theological commitment is that revelation is not sealed.⁶ And so all our religious language is partial and capable of being adapted in the light of new understanding. Therefore Unitarian theology must be rooted in the idea that we continually *discover* revelation, rather than the idea that we have *received* The Revelation, and now must *proclaim* The Revelation (The Gospel). This means that simply promoting our ideas or our faith or our church is an inadequate understanding of Unitarian evangelism.

Rather our commitment to continuous and imperfect revelation means that evangelism is not just about *giving* something to the outsider in the assumption that *I* have it and *they* don't but rather *seeking* something together by entering into *dialogue*. The practice of Unitarian evangelism is a dialogue, not a monologue.⁷ My encounter in a New York youth hostel involved me listening much more than speaking, and yet I have no hesitation in saying that in that moment I was engaged in the practice of evangelism.

2. Relations between persons ought to rest in free consent and not coercion

The second principle is the Unitarian commitment to freedom and mutual consent in human relations, both in the church, and in society.⁸ Thus free inquiry and freely chosen commitment are the best basis for discerning religious truth and forming religious community.

Coercion has no place in Unitarian evangelism. Evangelism is an open invitation to dialogue and is refusable.⁹ It is only in the context of freedom, non-coercion, and non-violence that evangelism can take place.¹⁰ Concretely this means, for example, 'evangelising' someone in a hospital bed could be unacceptable if the person cannot escape the conversation.

Free inquiry and mutual consent implies and requires a standard of honesty. This means that evangelism must be carried out with complete honesty and openness. Evangelism must be about truth-telling. So inviting someone to a social event – a night of bingo or a quiz for example - and then using that opportunity to push a message on someone is unethical evangelism because it is dishonest. There was a dishonesty in inviting someone to one kind of event when it was really something quite different.¹¹

Perhaps we think that we don't do that kind of thing. And yet the

Unitarian reluctance sometimes to name ourselves as ‘religious’, or to label ourselves as a ‘church’ could be a form of dishonesty. We seem to be seeking to remove labels that we think are off-putting to others, but when we do so we must ultimately ask this question: are we actually lying? Are we false advertising? A corporate business or political party may think it is OK to manipulate the truth, or put a spin on things, for the good of their cause. But that is not an option for us.

Equally I would say that when we say that Isaac Newton, Charles Dickens, Florence Nightingale, or Charles Darwin were Unitarians, we are at best being very loose with the truth, and I would argue we are in fact lying. Again I must emphasise that our means should be in harmony with our ends. Unitarian evangelism must stay committed to truth.

3. The need to work for a just and loving world

Thirdly, Unitarianism affirms the moral necessity of committing to creating a more loving and just community.¹² So evangelism must be understood as but one part of the mission of creating a loving, just, and beautiful world.

Evangelism is a dialogue of faith. This is different from works of love or justice but any sharp compartmentalising must be resisted.¹³ In the case of Street Angels it was because we were committing to simply helping people that there was an opportunity for an evangelical conversation. Someone asked why I was doing what I was doing, the answer I gave was because of my faith, so it was a moment of evangelism. But the reason for helping people cannot be to have that conversation, because that would be manipulative and dishonest. We help people because we believe we must help people, but if someone asks what motivates us it’s perfectly appropriate and honest to talk about faith.

4. The need for ideas to be incarnated in concrete communities

Fourthly, as Adams so beautifully put it, Unitarians ‘deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation.’¹⁴ This means that tradition and community are inescapable in pursuing truth and essential in pursuing justice.

This commitment to social incarnation means that evangelism must be rooted in the life of *community*. In other words it must closely relate to the church, it must be ecclesiological.¹⁵ As Stone writes, evangelism ‘is the practice of giving the world something to see – and to touch, and to try.’ And the world should see ‘a community of discipline in which

the Spirit can be discerned.¹⁶ Such a community of discipline demonstrates a 'distinctive set of habits, practices, disciplines and loyalties that together constitute a visible and recognizable pattern before a watching world.'¹⁷ That pattern includes a coherent set of stories, practices, and virtues such as love, hospitality, forgiveness, and non-violence. These virtues cannot be fully demonstrated in the life of an individual but must be practised in the context of community.

So a dialogue of faith must be a dialogue about faith community. Faith cannot be fully lived or demonstrated in isolation, though of course individual moments of evangelism may only include two people in dialogue. But at least implicitly evangelism features an invitation to community. 'I'm doing this because I belong to that church,' I had said to the inquirer when I was a Street Angel, literally pointing to my community. I didn't invite him to come along in the morning (it would not have worked if I did) but I was explicit that my faith and values had been shaped by a religious community and that indeed the service project he was encountering was only possible because of the support of such communities. My conversation in a cafe also arose out of the context of community. It was only because a visitor had come along on a Sunday 'to see, to touch, and to try' that I had said, 'Let's meet up next week and have a conversation.'

This is one thing that was not understood by, for example, the Unitarian van missionaries of one hundred years ago. They travelled around the country in their horse-drawn van, came into a town, preached a message, then left. The message never had any strength because it wasn't being incarnated in a real community, and so this was a largely ineffective Unitarian evangelistic effort.¹⁸ Any modern attempt at Unitarian publicity, disconnected from the witness of local communities, is likely to be equally as ineffective.

5. An ultimate attitude of hope

Fifthly Unitarians hold an ultimate attitude of optimism in the possibility of a world of justice and peace becoming a reality within history.¹⁹ This is indeed our good news. Though we affirm the continuity of revelation that does not mean that we have no commitments, no story, no good news of our own. We do. Unitarian faith is faith in the goodness, meaningfulness, beauty, and holiness of life. We do not believe the world is doomed, or going to be abandoned in some divine plan for another realm. This world is good, despite all the suffering and darkness it contains. And there is reason to hope that it can get better. Every act of service and love and activism is a witness to this hope; as is every moment of evangelical dialogue.

6. *The need for transformation or radical change*

Sixthly Adams argued that faith is a demand for ‘conversion,’ not merely at the moment of taking on a new faith, but continuously.²⁰ Adams wrote that this conversion ‘is to be understood as a change of heart, mind, soul – *total* personal orientation.’²¹ Adams gave this view of the mission of the Unitarian church:

The free church is that community which is committed to determining what is rightly of ultimate concern to persons of free faith... When alive, it is the community in which men and women are called to seek fulfilment by the surrender of their lives to the control of the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality. It is the community in which women and men are called to recognise and abandon their ever-recurrent reliance on the unreliable.²²

What form of Unitarian evangelism emerges out of this commitment to conversion or transformation? The answer is a form of evangelism where *both* parties are open to be changed, though we do not know who or how. This means we enter dialogue seeking truth, and are open to where such seeking will take us. We may enter into this dialogue thinking that we have found saving faith, something worthy of commitment, something of ultimate concern. But when we enter into the dialogue we do not know the outcome of that process. The dialogue may lead to three main outcomes:

1. It may be that *you* are transformed and join my faith community.
2. It may be that *I* am transformed and so join your faith or faith community.
3. Or it may be that we are both transformed and do not change our faith affiliations.²³

The point is we enter into evangelical dialogue but *we do not know* what the outcome will be.

I believe this shows the inadequacy of defining evangelism as ‘trying to convert someone’ to your faith. Such conversion is ultimately beyond our control. I may be ‘converted’ by deciding for myself to trust a faith commitment. Some might say that the Truth, or God, or the Holy Spirit converts me. But what is certain is that *you* cannot convert me. You can only enter into dialogue with me. And I can decide to be open to wherever that dialogue might take me. But my conversion is not within the control of another person.

The liberal evangelist has to be open to the possibility of being proved wrong. I can enter into dialogue with a Muslim and I have to be totally open to the possibility that I will discover that the Qur'an really is the final and fullest revelation of God, and that I should become a Muslim. I can enter into dialogue with a secular atheist and I have to be totally open to the possibility that I will discover that all religion is nonsense and harmful and that I should do something more useful with my life.

I enter into dialogue. I speak. I listen. And I am open to transformation. I do not know, and I can never know, in what form that transformation may take. It may take the form of someone saying 'I have changed my mind, I will now join your church' or it may take the form of a more subtle, mysterious, and powerful conversion that leads to a more authentic and liberated life. This dialogue involves a 'surrender' of outcomes to something beyond the control of any party.

To conclude: what are the results of evangelism?

To repeat myself: evangelism and church growth are not the same thing. Evangelism is a particular practice that may or may not lead to church growth. It should indeed grow out of a sense that we do have something to say to the world, some hope to give an account of, some reliable foundation for life we have discovered in faith.

But as liberals we have to be open to discovering something new, to discovering we are wrong. And in that sense evangelism may indeed lead to church decline, if we become convinced that we are on the wrong path.

So we enter into evangelical dialogue, not because we want church growth, but because we want truth and transformation. We enter into dialogue, not because we are convinced we have the right answers, but because we believe the very act of dialogue opens us to something else. I believe it opens us to God.

Being committed to the practice of evangelism means living our lives in such a way as to be open to such conversations and such transformation and such divine encounters. It is true that congregations can create opportunities for evangelical conversations, but most dialogues happen entirely spontaneously. It may be that ministers find themselves with more opportunities for evangelism, but this is something that anyone can do and everyone does do. If we enter into truly authentic open conversation with a person about ultimate concern, we are doing evangelism.

We may find ourselves listening much more than speaking. This is still evangelism. We may be on the street, in a church, or in a pub. It is all evangelism. It may change us as much as it changes anyone else. That is what evangelism does. Evangelism is a dialogue of faith, where we open ourselves to transformation.

Evangelism is a practice where we are prepared, with risk and vulnerability, to speak and to listen to the other. But with a sense of trust that in such moments of dialogue lives can be transformed. And I want to be clear that this isn't about having clever arguments. Clever arguments have no place here. It is about authentically speaking the truth of your life. It is about witnessing to what is in your soul, and creating a space where others can do the same.

And so when you think of evangelism I invite you to picture not someone knocking on a door and starting a manipulative conversation, not someone shouting on a street corner, not someone preaching hell-fire in a football stadium. As Unitarians we must reject these practices.

Rather I invite you to think of evangelism as two people talking about the meaning of life on the bunk beds of a youth hostel; think of evangelism as two people drinking coffee and talking about faith; think of evangelism as someone outside a kebab shop at 2 a.m. explaining what motivates them to volunteer to help people.

And think of evangelism like this: Shug Avery telling Celie, 'I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.'²⁴ That's a line in the novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. It comes from a conversation about the nature of God between Celie, the book's main character, and Shug Avery, the charismatic singer Celie meets. This, and other conversations, have a profound effect on Celie.

Celie begins the novel as a diminished human being, suffering from the abuse she has endured. But it is through the encounter with Shug, and the dialogues they enter into, that a transformation takes place in Celie. Celie opens up to a bigger experience of God and a growing sense of her own spirit and power. An encounter with another human being, a number of dialogues with another human being, opens up her spirit and brings her to full humanity.

That is what good evangelism looks like. This is what Unitarian evangelism looks like. A real encounter between humans where people come alive and encounter the divine.

- 1 Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defence of Ethical Proselytizing and Persuasion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011), p. 9, p. 12.
- 2 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 409
- 3 John Morgan, 'Shout It Out Folks: We're Evangelists, Too!' in *Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*, ed. by Scott W. Alexander (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), p. 16.
- 4 Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), p. 12.
- 5 James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essay in Religion and Society* edited by Max L. Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 12-20. However in a conversation with George Kimmich Beach I recently discovered that the organising of these principles into 'five smooth stones' was done by the editor Max Stackhouse by radically editing the writing of Adams.
- 6 See Stephen Lingwood, 'Some Foundations for Unitarian Theology' in *Unitarian Theology Conference*, ed. by David Steers, (*Faith and Freedom* For the Hibbert Trust, 2016), pp. 15 - 16.
- 7 Dialogue is an important motif in Lawrence Peers' guidelines for Unitarian (Universalist) evangelism. The guidelines include 'Look for opportunities for dialogue...Welcome questions...listen to the other person; ask probing and thoughtful questions... Because experience is a source of our personal religion-making listen to the other person's experience and also share your own.' Lawrence X. Peers, 'Out of the Sidelines and Into the Main Streets: Steps Toward an Evangelical Unitarian Universalism' in *Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations* by Scott W. Alexander (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), pp. 65-66.
- 8 Adams, p. 14.
- 9 Bosch says evangelism 'is always an invitation' (p. 413). Peers' guidelines for UU evangelism demonstrate this commitment when he writes, 'Be patient and respectful of differing views... Be clear about our core values and demonstrate them in our approach to the conversations about faith' (Peers, p. 66).
- 10 Thiessen identifies four forms of coercion which would make evangelism unethical: physical coercion, psychological coercion, social coercion, and inducement coercion; although he acknowledges some of these are easier to identify than others. See Thiessen (pp. 167-183) for a full discussion of the issues. The commitment against coercion existed at the earliest stages of Unitarian history in Transylvania. Francis David, in the sixteenth century wrote, 'we cannot make people accept the Gospel with weapons and threats, they obey voluntarily. There is no greater foolishness or even impossibility than wanting to externally force the conscienceness [sic] and the spirit, above which only the Creator can stand.' Quoted Elek Rezi, 'Contribution of Transylvanian Unitarianism to European Culture: The 500th Anniversary of the birth of David Ferenc' in *Faith and Freedom* Volume 64, Part 1, Number 172 (2011), 34-43 (p. 38).
- 11 Other examples of deception in evangelism are found in Thiessen, pp. 94-95.
- 12 Adams, p. 15.
- 13 Bosch, p. 418.
- 14 Adams, p. 17.

- 15 'The very *being* of the church has evangelistic significance.' Bosch, (p. 414).
Emphasis original.
- 16 Stone, pp. 315-316.
- 17 Stone, p. 317.
- 18 J. Roberts, 'The Van Mission' in *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*
Vol. XVI No. 4 (September 1978), pp. 188-193.
- 19 Adams, p. 18.
- 20 J. C. Leach, "'Something like conversion is essential": The Concept of *Metanoia*
in the Writings of James Luther Adams' *The Journal of Liberal Religion* Vol. 4,
Number 1 (Winter 2003).
(<http://www.meadville.edu/uploads/files/V4n1-Leach-Something-Like-Conversion-is-Essential-The-Concept-of-Metanoia-in-the-Writings-of-James-Luther-Adams-533.pdf> accessed 21/10/16), p. 15.
- 21 Leach, p. 9. Emphasis original.
- 22 Leach, p. 16.
- 23 Matthew Haumann writes, 'I suggest that mission can also be seen as a dialogue
where we share together, where we are sent to each other and share who we are.
We can leave it open who gets converted by whom: maybe in sharing both parties
are converted.' Quoted in *Resources for Preaching and Worship: Year C*: compiled
by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press,
2002), p. 172.
- 24 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2014),
p. 177.

Contributors

Dr Jane Blackall has worked part-time for a decade with Kensington Unitarians (Essex Church in London) as Outreach Officer. Before this, she had a career in academic research (in medical image computing, in which she gained a doctorate). In 2017 Jane gained a first-class degree in Philosophy, Religion, and Ethics at Heythrop College in London. She organises, develops and co-facilitates courses for Hucklow Summer School and has also been involved in denominational education and training initiatives. She was recently accepted to train for the Unitarian ministry.

The **Rev Lewis Connolly** is minister of Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and lived in Texas during his early years before moving to England. He studied theology at the London School of Theology before pursuing postgraduate studies and training for ministry at Westcott House, Cambridge. He worked for two years as an Anglican curate before joining the Unitarians. Lewis is married to Cat (an Anglican ordinand).

Rev Jim Corrigan has served as Unitarian minister to a new venture, the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry, since 2014, and to the congregations of Padiham, Rawtenstall and Chorley. Before this, he served a two-year interim ministry in Suffolk. Ministry is Jim's second career – journalism came first, including 17 years at BBC World Service in London.

The **Rev Ant Howe** began his religious journey as a member of a Pentecostal church, but, after questioning his place there, embarked on a religious quest. Always fascinated by the Bible, theology and religion, Ant found the Unitarians while studying for a degree in theology. Ministry training followed, including a post-graduate diploma in contextual theology. Ant has served as Minister at Kingswood for 11 years, and at Warwick for 8 years. He is tutor in Biblical Studies for the Worship Studies Course – and is a keen musician.

Stephen Lingwood was minister of Bank Street Unitarian Chapel, Bolton, for nine years, before becoming Pioneer Minister with Cardiff Unitarians at the beginning of 2018. He holds a degree in geology and biology from the University of Birmingham and masters' degrees in theology from Boston University and Manchester University. He edited the book *The Unitarian Life* (2008) and contributed chapters to *Sexuality, Religion and the Sacred: Bisexual, Pansexual and*

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